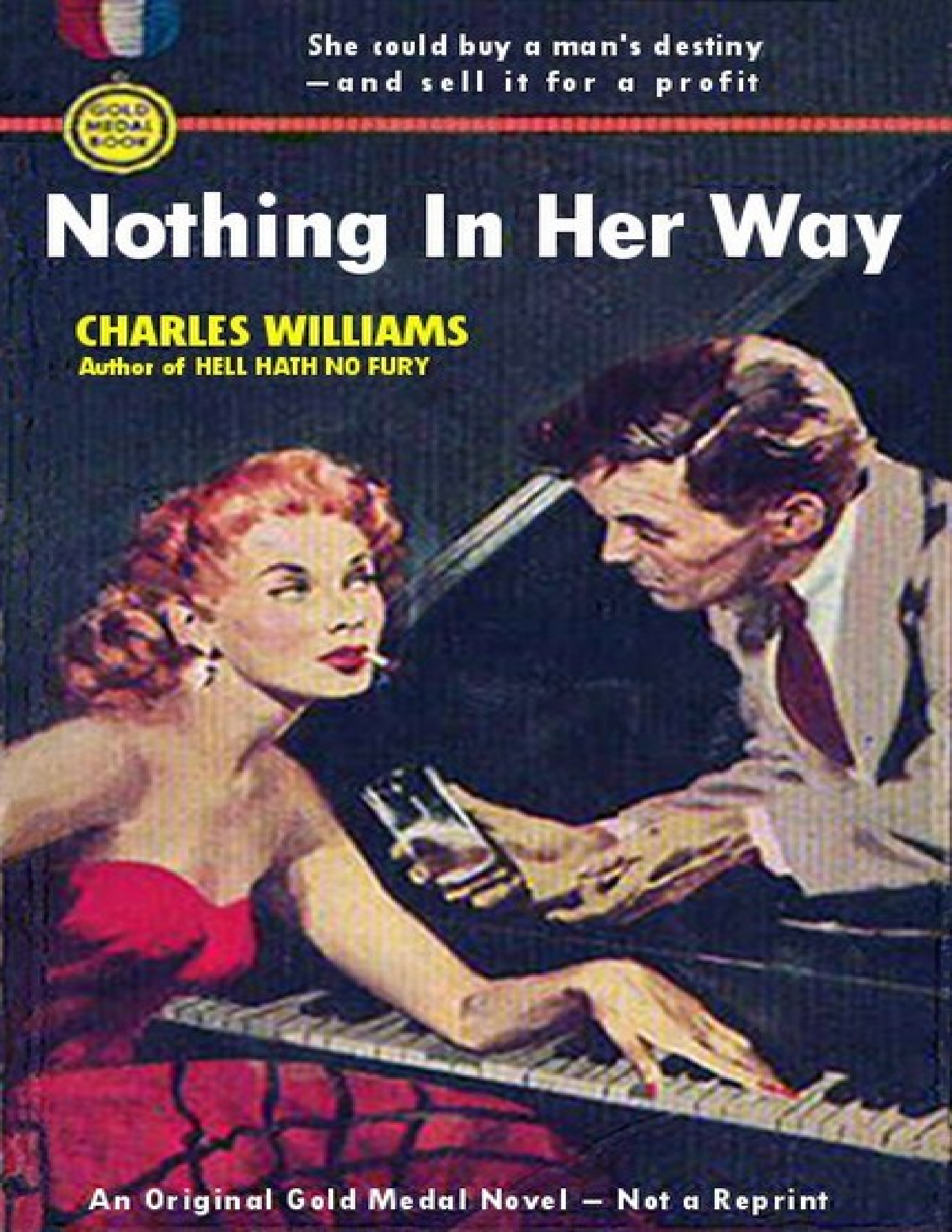
She could buy a man's destiny
—and sell it for a profit

GOLD MEDAL BOOK

Nothing In Her Way

CHARLES WILLIAMS
Author of HELL HATH NO FURY



An Original Gold Medal Novel — Not a Reprint

Nothing In Her Way

by

Charles Williams

1953

Contents

Title Page
One
Two
Three
Four
Five
Six
Seven
Eight
Nine
Ten
Eleven
Twelve
Thirteen
Fourteen
Fifteen
Sixteen
Seventeen
Eighteen
Nineteen

One

He looked as if he'd got lost from a conducted tour of something.

I didn’t pay much attention to him when he came in, except in the general way you notice there’s somebody standing next to you in a bar. Unless it develops he’s dead, or he has fingers growing on his ears, or he tips your drink over, you probably never see him. He did it that way, in a manner of speaking. I tipped his drink over.

I wasn’t in any mood for an opening bid about the weather. The track had gone from sloppy to heavy during the afternoon and outside the rain was still crying into the neon glow of Royal Street. It’d be soup tomorrow, and unless you tabbed something going to the post with an outboard motor you’d do just as well sticking a pin in the program or betting horses with pretty names. I’d dropped two hundred in the eighth race when Berber Prince, a beautiful overlay at four to one, just failed to last by a nose. I was feeling low.

It was one of those dim places, with a black mirror behind the bar, and while it was doing a good business, I hadn’t known it was that crowded. I’d just put my drink down and was reaching for a cigarette when I felt my elbow bump gently against something, and then I heard the glass break as it went over the bar. I looked down at the spreading Daiquiri, and then at him. It was odd. There’d been plenty of room there a minute ago.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “It didn’t spill on you, did it?”

“No. It’s all right.” He smiled. “No harm done.”

“Here,” I said. “Let me get you another one.” I caught the bartender’s eyes and gestured.

“No,” he protested. “I wish you wouldn’t. It was just an accident. Happen to anybody.”

“Not at all,” I said. “I knocked it over. I’ll get you another one.” The barman came up. “Give this gentleman another Daiquiri. And charge me with a glass.”

The barman mopped up and brought the drink. I paid for it. He picked it up and said, “Thanks. Thanks a lot. But don’t forget the next one’s on me.”

He looked like a cherub, or an overgrown cupid. He had on a blue serge suit too tight under the arms, a white shirt too tight in the collar, and a cheap hand-painted tie with a can-can dancer on it. You knew he’d been saving the tie for New Orleans. There wasn’t any convention badge, but maybe he’d been left over, or he’d lost it.

“My name’s Ackerman,” he said. “Homer Ackerman. I’m from Albuquerque.”

“Belen,” I said. He pumped my hand. Well, I thought, I can always make it to another bar, even in the rain.

“Belen?” he asked happily. “Why, that’s the name of a little town right near Albuquerque.”

“Yes, I know,” I said. “I’ve never been there, though.”

He was disappointed. It was obvious he was hoping I knew old Ben Umlaut who had the tractor agency, or maybe the Frammis boys. I wished he’d go ahead and ask me where a fella could find some—uh—girls, and then beat it, but you couldn’t just brush him off. Not with that face. It’d be like kicking a baby.

“Say, this New Orleans is some place, ain’t it?” he said. “To visit, I mean. Sure wouldn’t want to live here, though.”

He went on talking. I only half listened to him, and looked at a girl who was sitting on a stool at the other end of the bar. She had red hair, but it wasn’t quite the same shade of red…It never is. I wondered if I’d ever break myself of it. After all, it’d been two years.

“Gee, my feet are killing me,” Ackerman was saying. “I must have walked a hundred miles around this place. And then standing around out there at the race track—” He broke off and turned that cherubic smile on me again. “You prolly won’t believe this, but I won over ninety dollars out there. There was this horse running named Dinah Might, and it was raining, and I used to know an old boy named Raines who was a powder monkey—get it? Powder monkey, dynamite? And I’ll be dad-burned if he didn’t—”

I didn’t say anything. Dinah Might was the cheap plater who’d beaten out Berber Prince by the nose at something like forty to one. Maybe he’d go away.

“Say,” he said suddenly, “there’s an empty booth over there. Let’s sit down.”

I looked at my watch. “I’d like to, but I’ve got to run. Man I was supposed to meet—”

His face fell in on itself. “Oh, shoot. You’ve got time for just one, haven’t you?” he asked earnestly. “You can’t go off without me buying you that drink, after you bought me one.”

It was something about those open blue eyes, I guess. You just couldn’t destroy his faith in the people he picked up in bars. “O.K.,” I said. “Just a quick one.”

We carried our drinks over and sat down. The seats were leather-upholstered, with high backs. He started to light a cigarette, and then said, “Excuse me.”

“How’s that?” I asked.

“Oh.” He looked at me blankly. “I thought I kicked your foot.” He leaned down sideways a little and peered under the edge of the table. “I see what it was, I think. Looks like there’s something lying there on the floor.”

“There is?” I asked, without much interest.

“Uh-huh. Wait a minute. Maybe I can reach it.” He leaned down farther and grunted. “Nope. Can’t quite make it. I tell you. Push your right foot a little, straight ahead.”

I shoved the foot, and then he grunted again. “Now I got it.” He straightened up, his face red. “Le’s see what it is.” He stopped, and his mouth dropped open. “Say, Belen, look at this!”

It was a wallet, an expensive-looking job, and from the thick bulge of it there was plenty in it. But by now I wasn’t looking at the wallet. I was looking at him, and remembering the way that glass had happened to get in the way of my elbow. No, I thought. Nobody could dream up a character like this.

His voice had dropped to an awe-struck whisper. “Holy smoke, Belen! Twenties, fifties…Boy, there’s a wad in this!” Almost unconsciously, he had hitched his shoulder around so the wallet was hidden from the rest of the bar.

“Any name in it?” I asked.

“That’s a good idea,” he said excitedly. “Maybe we can find the guy and give it back to him. Le’s see.” He nodded. “Here it is. J. B. Brown,

Springfield. Can’t make out the name of the state.”

“That ought to be a cinch,” I said. “Just try Illinois, Ohio, and Massachusetts, and then work your way down to the others.”

He looked at me with innocent helplessness. “That many Springfields? What you think we ought to do?”

“I don’t know,” I said. I was still just waiting. “You have any ideas?”

“No-o,” he answered. “Except that we ought to try to return it. Wouldn’t be honest to—well, just keep it, would it?”

“No,” I said. “Of course not. Unless you just couldn’t find anybody named Brown living in Springfield.”

“Maybe you’re right. If we keep it for—say a reasonable length of time, and he didn’t come forward to claim it, I’d say it would be perfectly honest for us to divide it up.”

Well, I thought, I’ll be a sad son. There wasn’t any doubt of it now. I began to burn a little. Was he stupid, or new at it, or what? I knew I didn’t look like somebody who’d go for it.

Maybe the thing to do was ride along with him just for the laughs. “What do you mean, divide it up?” I said. “You found it. I didn’t.”

He shook his head. “No, by golly. You were right here with me, and you pushed it over where I could reach it. We both share in it. That is,” he added hastily, “if Brown doesn’t show up to claim it. Say, I think I’ve figured out a way we can handle it. There’s an old boy over at this little hotel where I’m staying, he works in a bank and he’s as honest as the day is long. We’ll let him hold it for us. And then, if nobody claims it, we’ll split it right down the middle. How’s that?”

“Sounds fine to me,” I said.

“Good.” He nodded, and then paused, a little uncertainly. “But there’s one thing.”

“What’s that?” I asked, knowing very well what it was.

“Well, it’s just in case Brown should show up later. I mean, to sort of prove good faith, and financial responsibility, in case we did have to give it back later on, I think each of us ought to be able to show cash of his own equal to his part of it.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I see what you mean. Something like a bond, to prove we could pay it back if we had to. We give it to your friend to hold, along with the wallet.”

He nodded. “That’s it, exactly.”

“All right,” I said. “Down, boy. You can put it back in your pocket and fade.”

“How’s that?” he asked, the guileless blue eyes growing wide.

“Look. It was old when the pharaohs were in the construction business. If you have to work the pigeon drop, why don’t you try the neighborhood bars?”

The smooth, pink face split open then, and he laughed. “Nice work, Mike.”

“Mike?” I asked. “You know me?”

He looked pained. “Really, Belen. You don’t think I’m that stupid in casing a mark? And I haven’t pulled anything as crude as a pigeon drop in twenty years.”

I was still a little angry. “Well, what’s the gag?”

“Don’t you know me?”

I shook my head.

“Charles,” he said. “Wolford Charles.”

It rang then. I’d heard of Wolford Charles—or Prince Charlie, as he was known to half the bunco squads in the country. But as far as I knew, I’d never seen him.

He must have been reading my mind. “You have an atrocious memory for faces, Mike. Don’t you remember that crap game in my hotel room in Miami last fall? You took four hundred dollars off me.”

I thought for a minute. “Sure. I remember that. But the only man I recall who looked anything like you was some gold-plated Bourbon from Philadelphia, by the name of—” I stopped.

He smiled reminiscently. “Precisely. Er—Shumway, as I recall. Eccentric chap. Cursed with an absolutely unshakable belief that he could make a six the hard way. A touching bit of faith in these days of spiritual bankruptcy, but mathematically unsound.”

I leaned back in the booth and lit a cigarette. “All right, but I still don’t make it. You didn’t think you were going to get your four hundred back that way.”

“One moment, Mike, please.” He shoved the Daiquiri away and asked the girl for Scotch without ice. “The late Mr. Ackerman’s feeling for drinks was almost on a par with his taste in cravats.” He looked down at the can-

can girl and winced. “But to get back to your question. Call it an intelligence test.”

“Why?”

“I was curious as to your reaction.”

“And so I spotted it,” I said impatiently. “What do I get? A merit badge?”

“I was thinking of something a little more substantial. To be exact, a piece of a small business venture I have under advisement at the present time.”

“I just got off,” I said. “It was nice meeting you, Charlie.”

“But Mike, old boy, you haven’t even heard it.”

“And I don’t need to. I already own an Arkansas diamond mine.”

He shook his head. “You misunderstand me. You put up no capital at all. It’s really in the nature of a job, with a nice slice of the bood—er, profits. Say ten per cent.”

“Nothing doing,” I said.

“But why?”

“I’m a gambler, not a con man.”

He gestured impatiently. “There is nothing whatever illegal about this. It’s just a simple matter of—ah—enhancing the value of a piece of real estate. But let me tell you about it, and about Miss Holman.”

“You’re wasting your breath,” I said.

“Miss Elaine Holman, a very charming and lovely young lady I met in New York. She’s connected with the theatre. Her mother and father are both dead, and she comes originally from a small town in the West.’ She was reared by an uncle who must be, from all accounts, one of the greatest scoundrels outside the pages of Dickens. You see, Mike, through a small irregularity in her mother’s will, this girl has been cheated of an inheritance of nearly seventy thousand dollars. All quite legally, of course, and there’s nothing the courts can do for her.”

“Yeah, I know,” I said. “And the uncle is in a Mexican prison, and the seventy thousand dollars is in the false bottom of a trunk being held by customs in Laredo. Cut it out, Charlie. Everybody’s heard of that one.”

He was hurt. “Please, Mike. I’m trying to tell you this is strictly on the level. All I’m trying to do is help this girl get back what is rightfully hers.

For a slight—ah—commission, of course. After all, I'm not a philanthropic institution, and the idea I have in mind will entail some expense."

"Roughly, around sixty-eight thousand, if I'm any judge," I said. "Provided, of course, the whole thing's not a pipe dream. But why are you telling me?"

"Because I want your help. I'm offering you a job."

"But I've already turned it down. Remember?"

He sighed. "I wish there was some way I could convince you this is strictly legitimate." He looked up then, past my shoulder, and brightened. "But perhaps Miss Holman can. Here she comes now."

I looked around, and then stood up, trying to keep my face still and stiffen the weak feeling in my knees. She was wearing a clear plastic raincoat with a hood, and her hair was the color of a bottle of burgundy held up to the light. As he had said, Miss Holman was a very lovely girl.

The only catch was that her name wasn't Miss Holman. I was reasonably sure of that. I'd known her for twenty-three years, and I'd been married to her for two.

Two

It was insane.

There wasn't a quiver of an eyelash as Charlie introduced us. She'd never seen me before. She looked at me and said coolly and quite pleasantly, "How do you do, Mr. Belen?"

I could hear Charlie still talking. "Mike is an old, old friend, my dear. I am trying to persuade him to join us."

I took it from her and played it deadpan. There didn't seem to be anything else to do, and I was too dumfounded to think. God alone knew what she was up to, and there wasn't any use even trying to guess. Was Charlie lying to me, or was she lying to Charlie? Since there was no known record of Charlie's ever having told the truth about anything, the answer would seem to be obvious, but I wasn't too sure. Dullness had never been one of her faults.

We sat down again, and she ordered a Ramos fizz. She was on Charlie's side of the table, directly across from me, and when the drink came she leaned forward a little and said, wide-eyed, "I do hope you'll help us, Mr. Belen."

She could open a safe that way. In Salem, they'd have burned her—or they would have if there'd been enough women on the jury. Nothing had changed in two years. The dark red hair was short-cropped and as carelessly tousled as a child's. Her face just missed being heart-shaped and petite, but there was nothing of the expressionless doll about it. It was mobile and almost flamboyantly alive, with only a subtle hint of the temperament you know damned well was there if you'd ever been married to her. She had a little dusting of freckles across the bridge of her nose, and her eyes were dark brown and a little long for her face. Right now there was a blue silk scarf knotted about her chin, the big bow coming up beside her cheek and giving her a deceptively little-girl look. She was a little girl, all right—the same loaded little girl with a short fuse.

We were divorced two years ago, and the only thing I'd heard of her in all that time was that she'd married some New York bookie named Lane. I thought of the last time I'd seen her. It was raining that night, too, and I remembered how black and shiny the streets were as we walked down the hill from the hotel in San Francisco. We said good-by quite calmly at the airline office on Union Square, and then I'd gone on to the men's bar in the St. Francis and ordered a drink, suddenly conscious of how peaceful everything seemed—and how empty.

I snapped out of it and came back to the present, realizing I'd been staring at her. Charlie's proposition had been nothing but a bore, but now it had exploded right in my face. There was a horrible fascination about it, and it boiled down to that same question: Just who was bamboozling whom? Was Charlie trying to sell me the sad story of Elaine Holman, or was she selling him?

But that was unbelievable. Charlie was a pro; he'd dealt in flimflam all his life; he had a mind like a steel trap; and he'd been around so long he wouldn't bet you even money you didn't have three hands on your left arm unless you'd let him take it home first and look at it. She couldn't have the colossal nerve to try to pull something on him. Oh, couldn't she? I thought.

I lit her a cigarette, and then one for myself. She gave me a smile that would warm a duck blind, and turned to Charlie. "I do hope Mr. Belen will join us. He's perfect for the job, and you just know instinctively that you can trust him."

I loved that. Maybe, I thought, in this idea they're cooking up, they have to leave somebody alone for a few minutes with a red-hot stove.

"Charlie," I said, "I still don't get what you want me for, but would you mind telling me a little more what this is all about? Just how are you going to get Miss Holman's money back for her?"

He took a sip of his drink and looked at me with a benign smile. "The modus operandi is somewhat involved, Mike. And we'd only bore Miss Holman, since she's already familiar with all its ramifications. Suffice it to say that its axis, or focal point, is a real-estate transaction of a rather novel sort."

"Who owns the real estate?" I asked.

"Miss Holman's uncle."

"And who's going to buy it?"

He raised his eyebrows in gentle surprise. “Why, Miss Holman’s uncle, naturally.”

“Oh, I see,” I said. “That was stupid of me. But what are you going to do if the uncle’s guardian catches you at it? I take it they must have him put away somewhere where he can’t hurt himself.”

“Miss Holman’s uncle is a banker, Mike,” he said, a little pained, “and a very astute businessman. As I remarked, the deal is a bit complicated, and, as any masterpiece, it suffers in condensation.”

I could see very well he wasn’t going to tell me anything unless I came in. Charlie was no fool. And I didn’t want to get mixed up in their shenanigan, whatever it was. What I wanted to do more than anything in the world was to get her alone for a few minutes, before this thing had me wondering who *I* was, and see if I couldn’t shake a little truth out of her. I’d never realized before just what a beautiful thing a simple, unvarnished fact could be—if I ever ran into one again.

Just then she looked at her watch and said, “I’m going to have to run. I’m expecting a telephone call at the hotel.” She stood up. “I’m very glad I met you, Mr.—ah—Belen.”

Charlie let me beat him to it, a little too obviously. You could see his angle. Let her work on me. “I’ll walk around with you,” I said. “Or get you a cab.”

“I wouldn’t like to trouble you,” she said.

“No trouble at all,” I replied. “It’ll be a pleasure.”

The rain had slowed to a fine drizzle. Instead of turning toward Canal as we came out, she went the other way, toward the French Quarter. I fell in beside her and took her arm. We walked in complete silence for a block and then turned off into a side street and went another block. I looked back. Charlie hadn’t followed us. We stopped under an awning, out of the misty rain that swirled beyond us under the cone of light from a street lamp. She looked up at me, big-eyed, her face still.

“All right, Miss Holman,” I said. “Make me cry.”

“Mike, please,” she said. “I didn’t know it was you. He said he had somebody in mind—to help us, I mean. A friend of his. But I had no idea who it was.”

“Never mind who I am,” I said. “I can still guess that—I think. What I want to know is which one of you erratic geniuses is the mother of Elaine

Holman, and why?”

“Well,” she said hesitantly, “I am.”

So my hunch had been right. She was trying to sell Charlie a gabardine mink. I wondered if she had any idea of the probable odds on that. But it could wait.

“Well, look,” I said. “I suppose you can explain it Let’s give it a try. I mean, why you’re mixed up in something with Wolford Charles, and what the hell you’re trying to do.”

She hadn’t changed expression. She was still watching me quietly with those big brown eyes.

“Isn’t there anything you wanted to tell me first, Mike?” she asked softly.

“Such as?” I asked, trying to sound tough about it.

“Well, I’m glad to see you.”

“I’m always glad to see you, Mrs. Lane.”

“I’m not married any more, Mike.”

“Off again, on again, Flanagan.”

“Jeff was killed. Eight months ago, by a holdup man.”

“Oh.” I wanted to crawl down a sewer. “I’m sorry, Cathy. I’m sorry as hell.”

“It’s all right. You were right, anyway. We were about to separate.”

“It’s too bad.”

“I’ve missed you, Mike.”

“And I’ve missed—” I stopped. What was the use in digging that up again? I’d always feel empty when she was somewhere else, and we’d always fight when we were together. You couldn’t win. “But let’s get back to this Holman pitch,” I said briskly. “Start talking, Cathy.”

“Well, there is an Elaine Holman,” she said.

“I thought there might be. But where is she?”

“In New York. I met her last year. And she does have an uncle who’s a banker in a small town named Wyecross near the Mexican border.”

“But what are you up to?”

“All right, I’ll tell you,” she said quietly. “I’ve found Martin Lachlan.”

“You’ve what?” I grabbed both her arms.

“That’s right.”

“When?” I demanded. “And why didn’t you write me?”

“I didn’t know how to reach you.”

“Wait a minute,” I broke in. “This man in Wyecross—this banker—he’s Lachlan. Is that it?”

She shook her head. “Lachlan’s in Mexico.”

“Where in Mexico?”

“If I tell you, will you help me?”

“Look,” I said. “I’ve been waiting to catch up with Lachlan as long as you have.”

“All right. He’s in Lower California—fishing, at La Paz. But he has an apartment in San Francisco, among other places, and that’s where we’ll find him when we’re ready.”

“Ready, hell. We’re ready now.”

“No, we’re not,” she said. Then she looked up at me. “Unless—How much money do you have?”

“Thousand—eleven hundred dollars. About that.”

“Then we’re not ready. It’ll take a lot more than that even with what I have.”

I began to catch on. “Then you dreamed up this Holman thing to raise the money? You sold Charlie on it, and he’s going to split with you?”

“Yes,” she said simply.

“I see. The end justifies the means.” It always did with her. “Even if it means helping Wolford Charles swindle some man who never heard of Lachlan?”

“That isn’t quite the case. You haven’t asked me yet who this Wyecross man is.”

“Who is he?”

“His name is Goodwin.”

“What? Not that one!”

“Yes. Howard C. Goodwin.”

“You sure it’s the same one?”

“Mike, darling, I spent a week in Wyecross, doing a survey for—for—I’ve forgotten the name of the agency—I know everything there is to know about everybody.”

As I said, dullness wasn’t one of her faults.

I was still holding her arms. For some reason I’d forgotten to turn them loose. “Mike,” she whispered, “you’ll help us, won’t you? I need—I mean,

we need you."

There's always a warning, if you'll listen to it. It buzzes when you're playing cards with strangers and get an almost perfect hand, and it's always smart to listen. I could hear it now, but very faintly, as I thought of the law and of Wolford Charles and of the mess we could get into. But I was touching her and she was looking at me, and Lachlan was somewhere at the end of it. I couldn't hear it very well.

"Yes," I said. "I'm with you. Let's get started."

I should have turned up my hearing aid.

We flagged a cab and went around to her hotel. We'd go out somewhere for dinner, she said, and she wanted me to meet Judd Bolton, a friend of hers from New York. He was in the deal.

"Does he know who you are?" I asked. "I mean, what name do you use around him?"

She laughed. "I've known him a long time, and he knew Jeff. I asked him to help me, and he was the one who suggested getting Charlie. Charlie's the only one who thinks I'm Elaine Holman."

"If he does," I said.

I was itching to find out what else she had learned about Martin Lachlan, and to get a line on this thing they had rigged for Goodwin, in Wyecross, but there wasn't time to get much information out of her. She said Charlie'd brief me on the Wyecross deal in the morning.

"They don't know anything about Lachlan," she said. "We do that alone."

"That's right," I said. "Lachlan's ours."

He'd been ours for a long time. Except for the slight matter of finding him.

At the hotel she went up to the desk to call Bolton's room. I watched her across the lobby, conscious that she was still one of the most beautiful girls I'd ever seen and thinking it was a shame more of them didn't learn to walk. While she was talking, I drifted over to the newsstand to see if the Racing Form had come in. It hadn't, and it was while I was standing there looking idly around the lobby that I discovered I wasn't the only one watching her.

He was sitting like a limp doll in a big overstuffed chair near the doors with a paper in his hands, dark, thin-faced, a forgotten cigarette hanging out of the side of his mouth. The paper was lowered into his lap and he was

watching her with the unwinking intensity of a hungry child. In a minute she turned away from the desk and he put the paper up again. I stood there a minute, wondering about it. It was probably nothing. Everybody looked at her. It was just 1926 again and he was asking her if she'd ever seen the view from his apartment window, before going back to tomorrow's selections at Hialeah.

Maybe, I thought uneasily. If that'd been spring in his face, they ought to get the women and children out before winter.

In a few minutes Bolton came down, and she introduced us. He was about thirty, big, expensive-looking, and tough in a civilized sort of way. Maybe it was the eyes. They were gray and they didn't say anything, but you got the impression they could be hard as well as urbane. We got off to a bad start.

She explained who I was and told him I was in the act. He smiled at me, with not quite enough nastiness to pin down.

"Horses a little off their form, eh?" he asked. It wasn't hard to translate. I was a broke horse player looking for a handout.

"Are they?" I said.

I could see dinner wasn't going to be much if we had to have him along, but I was ready to try. We were going to be in this thing together, and we might as well make some effort to hit it off.

We went over into the French Quarter and stopped in a little hole in the wall for a drink while we made up our minds where to eat. There were some Navy uniforms up front at the bar, and a row of empty booths, and in the back a jukebox with colored lights was sobbing its heart out over something. We walked back to one of the booths, while the uniforms looked her over for spavin and bowed tendons, and she and Bolton sat down on one side and I got in across from them with my back toward the door. She ordered a Martini, and Bolton and I settled for Scotch.

The drinks came. The uniforms drifted out and the place was empty except for us. The flood of tears from the jukebox shut off and it shifted over to something by Vaughn Monroe. "Salud y pesetas," I said to Cathy.

She started to raise the Martini and then stopped, as if she had run into an invisible glass wall. The door had opened and closed behind me, and now I heard footsteps coming along the row of booths, unhurried footsteps sounding like a sequence out of a B movie. Bolton looked up over my

shoulder and I could see his face get dirty with fear. I turned my head to try to see what it was in the mirror behind the bar. It was the man from the hotel lobby.

He still looked like a corrupt and undernourished child, even in the baggy overcoat and with a gray snap-brim hat pushed back on his head. The dangling cigarette was gone now, but he carried the thin face tipped to one side as if the smoke still trailed up past the expressionless black eyes. As I watched him I was conscious of the odd impression that he looked like a gangster would who spent most of his time at crime movies studying the dress and mannerisms of hoodlums. He stopped and stood looking at us. Or rather, he was looking at Cathy. He gave me one negligent glance and forgot me, and appeared to have no interest in Bolton.

“I guess you forgot me,” he said. “In such a hurry to leave, you forgot all about me.”

“No,” she said. She put down the drink at last. “I didn’t forget.”

“Then maybe you just didn’t care.”

She was watching him the way a tiger eyes the man with the chair and whip. It wasn’t fear in her eyes, just watchfulness. “I think I told you once. I haven’t got that much money.”

“You can forget that dodge,” he said. “I know all about the insurance he left.”

Before she could say anything, Bolton spoke up. You could almost smell the fear in him. “I’m sure Mrs. Lane will pay you, Donnelly. It’s just that it takes time to get that much money.”

She gave him a quick, sidewise glance of contempt. “How about it?” Donnelly asked, ignoring him.

“I told you—” she began.

He moved a leisurely step nearer the table, leaned over it past Bolton, and his arm swung. The whole thing was so unhurried and deliberate it caught me by surprise and I sat there like a fool. His opened hand cracked against the side of her face with a sharp column of sound above the honeyed crooning of the juke. The arm came back and I caught it and turned.

It was like twisting a pipe cleaner. There was no strength or resistance in it at all. He half turned, with his elbow on the table, and looked at me

utterly without interest as if I were a roach that had just crawled out of the woodwork.

“Who’s the strong boy?” he asked Cathy.

The barman was running up. I let the arm go and Donnelly straightened up. The side of Cathy’s face was stinging red, but she made no move to put a hand to it.

“What’s going on here?” the barman asked with a truculent glance at all of us.

Donnelly jerked a negligent thumb. “Beat it. We want anything, we’ll call you.”

“You want me to call the cops?”

“No,” Cathy said. “We’re all right.”

He went back to the bar, but kept watching us. Donnelly leaned on the table. “You better think it over, sweetie,” he said. “Don’t make me look you up again. You wouldn’t like it.”

He turned and started to go out, and then looked back. He nodded at me without even looking at me. “And if Strong Boy here is a friend of yours, you ought to tell him about putting his fat hands on people. I don’t like that rassling stuff.”

I started to get up to follow him to the door, but she gave me an urgent glance and shook her head.

He was gone. She picked up her drink and took a sip of it, then turned and looked at Bolton.

“You can finish your little drink now, dear,” she said. “I don’t think he’ll be back.”

Three

I didn’t get much sleep that night. There were too many questions going around in my mind trying to mate with answers that weren’t there, and I was busy with twenty-three years’ accumulation of Cathy Dunbar Belen Lane. That was a large order of just one girl, I thought. Wasn’t it enough for one lifetime? Did we have to go around again?

If she was mixed up in something dangerous, was it any of my business any more? Who was this Donnelly, and what did he want? She’d only shrugged him off when I’d asked her. “A cheap hoodlum,” she said indifferently. “He has some stupid idea I owe him money.”

Then she turned and smiled charmingly in Bolton’s direction. “I do think it’s cute, though, the way he impresses Mr. Bolton.” If she got the knife in you, don’t think she wouldn’t turn it. She despised people she could walk on.

His face was red with impotent fury. “I tell you, Cathy, the man’s dangerous. He’s as deadly as nitroglycerin. He’s not all there.”

“I agree with you, dear,” she said sweetly. “If he thinks he’s going to collect money from me, he’s certainly not all there.”

Bolton didn’t add up at all. When you dipped into him, you came up with both hands full of nothing. It was easy enough to write him off as a coward, the way she did, but something said it wasn’t that simple. Why? There wasn’t anything you could put a finger on, for God knows his face and his voice had been rotten with that cringing before Donnelly. Maybe, I thought wearily, as I gave it up, he’s read Donnelly’s clippings and I haven’t.

It was strange, the way you couldn’t escape from the past. Or was it the past? Maybe she was the thing I could never get away from. I lit another cigarette and tried to think objectively about it. Of course I hated Lachlan; but why was it always intensified when I was with her? Just how often had I thought about him during the past two years?

No, I thought, that's not right. I'm just trying to blame her for something I've got the same way she has. It's all tied up with both of us and we're all tied up with it and each other, and we always have been.

When she was four and I was six it was a white-nosed bear with a terrible voice and flashlights for eyes that made her tell stories and get into trouble. I believed it about the bear. She convinced me. It wasn't that I lacked sophistication in the matter of bears, for I had seen them, in the Sierra Madre, with my father and hers; it was just that her bear was very real. You could almost see it yourself when she told you about it, and if it had flashlights for eyes—well, stranger things had happened. Stranger things had happened to her, anyway.

It was a long way back to those days when we were a couple of imaginative and bilingual kids playing with real Indians and imaginary bears, when the construction firm of Dunbar & Belen had built a lot of bridges and dams in the republics south of the Rio Bravo. That was before the firm had become Dunbar, Belen & Lachlan, and then had become nothing at all with the devastating suddenness of a dam going out. That was what it had been, a dam. And when it collapsed, it took Dunbar and Belen. It didn't take Lachlan.

It was a long time before the whole story was pieced together, and when it was, it didn't matter very much. Dunbar was dead—he died two years after they were released from prison—and while my father was still alive, he never seemed to take much interest in the fact. It wasn't that there had been any loss of life in the disaster; as they said afterward, that was their only piece of luck. It hadn't killed anybody. It had just cost them their company and their good reputations and two years of their lives.

Lachlan was the junior member of the firm, both in years and in seniority. He had been in residence on that job in Central America, in charge, with a second in command by the name of Goodwin. Of course, Dunbar and my father had been there a dozen times or more, but you can't see everything, especially when you trust the man who's doing the job. And when the dam folded up like water-soaked cardboard, they flew in in a chartered plane. Police were waiting for them at the airport.

Lachlan hadn't sold any of the reinforcing steel. That would have been too easy to spot. But with Goodwin in charge of the concrete work, government inspectors for sale, and native labor who didn't know a mix

specification from the second chorus of “The Peanut Vendor,” it was just stealing candy to divert around a hundred thousand dollars’ worth of the cement into his own channels. Most of the proceeds had gone into the campaign fund of another eager beaver on the make—an army colonel who had his eye on the presidency. The two of them pulled it off. About a week before the dam folded, the colonel had taken over the government in a palace revolution. How could Lachlan lose? He didn’t. Dunbar and Belen went to jail, while Lachlan and the colonel took over what was left of the firm and only God knows how much of the damages collected by the government. You’ll never go broke taking it out of one pocket and putting it in another.

That was in 1936. I said I’d kill Lachlan when I grew up. Cathy said I’d have to get there first, because she was going to kill him. She was ten years old.

We grew up that way, the two of us with that shared obsession for revenge. After a while, of course, we gave up the childish and impractical idea of killing him, since that wouldn’t prove anything at all and would probably land us in the electric chair besides. What we were going to do was more poetic. We were going to take him the way he had taken our fathers. It was a large project for a couple of kids.

I ground out the cigarette and lay looking up at the dark. We knew where he was at last. But could we do it? How could we do it? Lachlan would be nearly fifty now; he’d been everywhere and done everything; and he was a swindler himself and knew all the angles. It was still a large project, and I didn’t know.

And then it occurred to me that I didn’t even know yet what this plan was they had cooked up for Goodwin.

I found out in the morning. Charlie told me. And it was sweet.

* * *

He was staying at the Roosevelt. When I go over to his room around eleven a.m. Cathy and Bolton were already there. Charlie was still in a silk dressing gown, the plump, angelic face pink from fresh barbering, and was just finishing a breakfast consisting of a Persian melon and a large pot of cafe Creole in the living room of his suite. He lighted one of his precious

Havana cigars with slow, loving care and leaned back to smile benignly at me.

"Ah, come in, Mike," he said. "I see that Miss Holman's powers of persuasion are somewhat better than my feeble efforts."

Did he really think she was Elaine Holman? I wondered. But we had to keep up the act. I looked across at her. She was very lovely and chic in a brown suit with a fur piece dangling in casual elegance from her shoulder.

"If that puzzles you, Charlie," I said, "take a look at yourself and then at Miss Holman."

She smiled at me and said, "Thank you, Mr. Belen."

I still wondered about it. Nobody had kidded Charlie about anything since he was five. But, actually, what difference did it make whether he thought she was Elaine Holman or Florence Nightingale? He could still run out with all the money either way.

Bolton and I nodded curtly to each other to get it over with for the day. I thought about last night, and wondered if she still had the harpoon in him. She seemed to despise him—but why was she mixed up with him?

Maybe it was an act for my benefit, I thought suddenly. Maybe there was more to their "business" relationship than met the eye. I stopped, silently cursing myself. What was I getting jealous for? We weren't married any more, were we? What did she mean to me? Nothing at all, I told myself. Nothing.

"Well, I'm here, Charlie," I said. "I take it I'd only be wasting time trying to get you to raise your offer of fifteen per cent."

"A very sound hypothesis, Mike," he agreed, "if a little weak in the statistical department. The figure was ten per cent."

I shrugged resignedly. I'd known it was ten, of course, but to make it look good I had to haggle a little.

"All right," I said. "Just when and how do we sandbag Miss Holman's uncle?"

He winced. "Mike!"

"O.K. But how? Remember, I know nothing at all about it. What do I do?

He removed the cigar and looked at it thoughtfully. "Ah, I intended to ask you last night, Mike. Did you ever study chemistry?"

“In high school,” I said, puzzled. “By the time I got to college I knew better. Why?”

“It isn’t important. You’re a chemical engineer in this little venture we have in mind, and a slight knowledge of chemistry would, of course, be no great liability.”

“I’m glad you told me,” I said. “I used to know that salt was sodium something. Remind me to look it up sometime.”

He smiled soothingly. “As I say, it doesn’t matter. The secret of a thing of this kind, Mike, is never to talk shop with people who do know. And, since you are to conceal the fact that you’re a chemical engineer, you should encounter no difficulty.”

“Then there’s nothing to it,” I said. “It’s easy. I’m not a chemical engineer, but I’m pretending to be one, so I can pretend I’m not one. Is the rest of the scheme that simple?”

Bolton was boredly reading a copy of *Fortune*. Cathy was listening and watching us, but without much interest. They both knew the whole thing by heart, of course.

Charlie delicately tapped the long ash from his cigar. “A quite—ah—understandable bewilderment, Mike. At first glance it might seem a little involved, but there is a very good reason behind it. Now, to begin with, you go to Wyecross alone. The entire first act—aside from what has already been done—is yours, and I need not add, of course, that the success of the whole venture depends upon you. Miss Holman is driving to San Antonio tomorrow to visit friends, and no doubt she would be glad to have your company for that part of the journey. Beyond San Antonio, I suggest you travel by bus. Mr. Bolton and I shall be in Houston until later developments necessitate our appearing on the scene. You will, of course, have our address.

“Now, to get to the core of the matter. Mr. Goodwin, who is a man of about forty, is cashier of the Stockmen’s Bank, the only bank in Wyecross. From his father he inherited a large block of the bank’s stock, in addition to some fifteen thousand acres of land lying just east of Wyecross. Practically all this land is utterly unfit for anything, being nothing but a sort of Sahara in miniature, an endless waste of sand dunes. I have observed it from the club car of the train, Mike, and a more utterly desolate landscape I never

hope to see. My only hope is that, since you will be there some time, you don't go stark mad."

"Never mind the description," I broke in. "What's all this got to do with it?"

He raised his eyebrows. "Everything, my boy. Now, upon your arrival in Wyecross, you will go to Frankie and Johnnie's Kottage Kamp." He closed his eyes and shuddered slightly, and then went on. "You will go to this revolting caravansary and engage a room, or a court, as I believe it is called."

He went on talking, and he told it well. After a while I began to see the basic pattern of it, and had an idea of what he was aiming for, and it was a sweet piece of work. There was one hitch to it, however, and that was I couldn't make out where the money came in. The way it was set up, it didn't make sense. I broke in and asked him, and when he told me, I saw the poisonous beauty of it all at once like a light coming on. It was really rigged.

It wasn't just a simple matter of having it explained to me once. I had to be coached in it. We went over it for hours. We adjourned for lunch, and then came back and went at it again. I went out in the afternoon and visited the bank, and bought the few props I'd need, and returned to my hotel to pack.

Bolton disappeared somewhere. Charlie and I took Cathy out to dinner, and I stayed with her until she was back in her hotel. I was still thinking of Donnelly. We didn't see anything of him.

We left early in the morning. She was driving a '51 Cadillac, and she rode it hard. We talked very little. She was concentrating on the driving, and I was trying to stay off the "do-you-remembers."

Once she said, "You're not sorry, are you, Mike?"

"About what?" I asked.

"That you came in with us?"

"No. Of course not. I want Lachlan as badly as you do. And Goodwin too, for that matter."

"That's the only reason, then?"

I turned and looked at her. "I don't know," I said.

"We had a lot of fun, didn't we, Mike?"

"And a lot of fights."

“Do you know why I’m going to San Antonio?” she asked.

“Why?”

“We might get to see each other once in a while. It’s not too far to Wyecross. And, of course, I couldn’t stay in Wyecross with you, because Charlie thinks I’m Goodwin’s niece.”

“You hope.”

We got into San Antonio around eight p.m. She went to a hotel, while I took my bags around to the bus station and checked them. The next bus going west was at ten-forty-five. I met her in the lobby and we went out for dinner, both of us a little quiet.

Afterward we climbed down the steps at the end of one of the bridges and walked along beside the river. It ran through the middle of the city in a series of little pools and falls, with stone walks and benches along the banks. The night was brilliantly clear and a little frosty, and straight up beyond the glow of the city you could see the cold shine of desert stars.

She was wearing a gray fur coat with the collar turned up against her cheek, and a crazy little hat was perched on one side of the tousled red hair with a sort of schoolgirl carelessness. She was very lovely.

We stopped and watched the shine of lights on the water.

“Mike, do you remember—” she began.

“No,” I said. “I have a poor memory.”

“Why?

“It broke down. Overload, I think.”

“It’s too bad.”

“Isn’t it?”

According to the best scientific theories, a girl has no glamour, enchantment, mystery, or attraction for the man who has known her since she was three years old and who has fought with her and played cowboys with her and swum off sand bars with her under the blazing sun on tropical rivers the color of coffee and who has been married to her and has fought with her again and who has been divorced from her and has forgotten her entirely in two years. It’s very scientific. I made myself watch the lights.

“What time does your bus leave, Mike?”

“In about an hour.”

“Do you have to go tonight?”

There wasn’t anybody else around. I turned away from the lights on the water and they were shining in her eyes until she closed them, and the lashes were very long like shadows on her face when I raised my head after a while and looked at her.

“No,” I said.

Four

When I began to see the sand I knew I was almost there. Beyond the rusty strands of barbed wire it stretched away toward the horizon on both sides of the highway in desolate and wind-ruffled dunes, with only a tumbleweed or gaunt mesquite here and there to break the monotony of it. Then I could see the water tank up ahead.

Wyecross was a bleak little town lost in the desert like a handful of children's toys dropped and scattered along the highway. It was afternoon now under a sky like a blue glass bowl, and the three blocks of the business district were half asleep in the glare of the sun. I climbed down at the bus station and stood on the high sidewalk while the driver dug the two bags out of the luggage rack. A gust of wind slammed up the street like a balled fist, pushing at me, and I could taste the grit.

I took the bags and went into the restaurant that was also the bus station. The coffee was bitter with alkali. There was a jukebox at the other end of the counter and it was crying the same dirge the other one had, in that bar in New Orleans. I thought of Donnelly. He couldn't find her in San Antonio. Couldn't he? He'd found her in New Orleans, hadn't he? The coffee didn't warm the cold ball of uneasiness in my stomach.

I turned and looked out the big flyspecked window in front, past the shoddy Christmas decorations that had never been taken down, and the cardboard signs propped against the glass. They were blank on this side, but you knew they advertised Coca-Cola and some brand of cigarettes and maybe what was playing Sun., Mon., Tues. at the only movie in town.

I saw it then. It was diagonally across the street, on the corner. It was like a thousand others between Chesapeake Bay and Puget Sound, with two marble or imitation marble columns in front and the name and assets written on the window in gold leaf. Stockmen's Bank, it said. The door was closed now, because it was a little after three, and a small blind was pulled down in back of the glass. They'd still be at work, though, and I thought of

him inside there, not knowing that after sixteen years I was right across the street from him.

Lachlan had always been the one, because he was the top boy, the brain, the one who'd engineered it. I hadn't thought of Goodwin for a long time, and in fact had even forgotten his first name was Howard. But now that I was so near and had actually caught up with him, I began to feel that same old hatred for him that I'd felt so long for Lachlan. He was just as guilty. I wanted to cross the street and see him, just look at him, but I didn't. That wasn't the way to do it. I'd meet him when the time came, but it had to be done according to plan.

I picked up the bags and walked back along the sidewalk the way we had come in. It was only two blocks to the edge of town. The sidewalk ended abruptly, as if it had got scared and quit when it saw the desert. There was a gas station on the left, and just beyond it, on the right, was the motel. It was about a dozen frame cabins painted a scabrous brown and grouped in a hollow square with the open end facing the highway. The sign on the arch over the driveway said, "Frankie & Johnnie's Kottage Kamp—Vacancy." The first cabin on the left was the office. I walked across the gravel and rang the bell.

Frankie or Johnnie was a fat man somewhere around forty who hadn't shaved for two or three days. He had on cowboy boots, and his paunch hung out over the top of a pair of skin-tight Levis apparently held up by the friction on his legs and backside. The eyes were muddy brown and questioning. "Yessir?" he said.

"Vacancy?" I asked.

"Sure thing." The eyes went beyond me, sweeping the driveway, and then looked down at the suitcases. "You got a car?"

"I came on the bus," I said.

"Oh." He considered this. Apparently nobody had ever stopped here before without a car. "Sure. We can fix you up. Just for tonight, huh?"

I shook my head. "I'll probably be here for some time. I'd like to have it by the week, or month, if I could get a rate."

We arrived at a deal after a few minutes' haggling, and I paid him a month in advance and signed the register as Julius Reichert of New Orleans. I could see the curiosity working on him. He got a key and we walked up the gravel drive.

It was a small cubbyhole as bleak as a Grosz drawing. The front of it was furnished with an iron bedstead and a shaky night table and an old rocker, while at the rear there was a sink and a two-burner gas stove on a table. He bent down and stuck a match to the open gas heater, which had flakes of asbestos up the back behind the flame. The asbestos turned red in the heat.

"Don't go to sleep with it burning and all the doors and windows closed," he said. "It'll suffocate you."

"All right," I said. I put the bags down.

He paused on his way out, with his hand on the door. "Salesman, I guess, huh?"

"No," I said. "I don't sell anything."

"Oh." He went out.

I sat down on the bed and lit a cigarette. The gas heater burned with a slight hiss, and outside I could hear the wind searching restlessly around the cabins. I tried to think about it. It had gone all right. In less than a week the whole town would be as curious as he was right now. Why would a man—and an obvious Easterner, at that—come to a whistle stop like this in the middle of nowhere, take a cabin by the month, and just stay here, doing nothing at all? And if they thought that was odd, they would have their hands full when they began to get the rest of the act.

Then I wasn't thinking about it. I was thinking about her. I could see her. I could almost feel her there in the cabin. The hell, I thought; it wasn't this bad before, when we split up. I'd missed her, but not like this. It was just the bleak loneliness of this God-forsaken outpost at the end of nowhere. That had to be it. Before, there had been the gambling, and big cities, and other girls, and always the horses running. Sure, that was all it was, just the loneliness.

I could see I didn't want much of this—this sitting around here thinking how it had been in San Antonio and listening to the wind. I wondered how long it would take. A month? But we couldn't rush it. That would be fatal. He had to come to me. All I could do was set out the bait and wait for him. But she was going to drive up Saturday night, a week from tomorrow. It was only eight days.

I went into the cold bathroom and shaved. I looked strange with the crew haircut and the steel-rimmed glasses. Dr. Julius Reichert, I thought, the

dedicated chemist who doesn't know a compound from a mixture. We were taking long chances. Would Goodwin go for it?

After I changed clothes I walked back to town and sat around the drugstore, reading magazines. Around six I picked out the most likely-looking of the town's three restaurants and ate dinner—pork chops and applesauce—thinking of the bisque d'ecrevisses at Antoine's. Since it was Friday night, the movie was a Western. I walked back to Frankie and Johnnie's in the windy dark and thought of Sunday and shuddered.

The bank was open a half day Saturday, but I didn't go near it. I'd do that Monday. I read the rest of the magazines and listened to the coveys of jail bait chatter around the drugstore. The waitresses in the restaurant were beginning to recognize me. I didn't talk to them except to agree to whatever they said about the weather.

I awoke at dawn on Sunday, and could hear the coyotes somewhere out on the prairie. It was funny, I thought, remembering, how only two or three could sound like thirty. After I'd eaten breakfast I put on the boots I'd bought, dressed in khaki trousers and a flannel shirt, and went for a long walk, taking a couple of the little cardboard boxes in my coat pocket. A half mile east of town I left the highway where the dunes began and went out across country, skirting the edge of the sand. It was clear, with a cold wind blowing and making a lonely sound in the telephone lines. I thought of what Charlie had said. He hoped I didn't go mad.

There was no danger of getting lost, with the highway always to the north and the haze-blue shadows of the mountains far off in Mexico as a landmark to the south. The highway was out of sight, but I could still see the telephone lines after I'd gone a mile. I sat down in the sun on the south side of a dune, out of the wind, and smoked a cigarette. It was lonely and wild and desolate, but it was better than the cabin or the town.

Before I went back I filled the two boxes with sand and stowed them in my coat pocket. They were about the size of the boxes kitchen matches come in, but stronger, and I had three dozen of them and some about twice as large in one of the bags in the cabin. When I got back I wrapped them in brown paper for mailing and wrote on them the address Charlie had given me. It was an actual address, some friend of his who knew about the deal.

Early Monday morning I took them down to the post office and mailed them. Neither the clerk nor the usual post-office loiterers paid much

attention to me. As soon as it was ten o'clock I went around to the bank. I had a cashier's check for six hundred dollars made out to Julius Reichert, which I had bought in New Orleans.

There were two desks in the railed-in area up front, before you got to the tellers' cages. They were both empty. I cursed myself for coming too early. I'd wanted to get a look at him, at least. Well, it didn't matter too much. I'd be in and out often enough. As I went past, toward the tellers' cages, I sneaked a look at the names on the desks. The rear one was his. H. C. Goodwin, it said.

I deposited the check and made out a signature card to open an account. The teller gave me a checkbook. As I started to turn away, he asked, "Are you new here in town, Mr. Reichert?"

"Yes," I said shortly.

"Going to make Wyecross your home?"

"I don't know," I said.

As I moved away from the window I saw a man entering the gate in the railing up front. I slowed, waiting to see which desk he went to. He hung up the Western-style hat on a rack and sat down at Goodwin's desk, the rear one. I turned, very casually, and looked at him, feeling the hard beat of the pulse in my throat. This was one of them, at least. Not the big one, but one of them. There was nothing about him that I remembered at all, but then I had seen him only two or three times, sixteen years ago. He had a square, tanned face with sun wrinkles at the corners of the eyes. The eyes themselves were brown and alert behind gold-rimmed glasses, and his hair, which was also brown, was thinning out high on his temples. It wasn't a hard or unpleasant face any way you looked at it. Well, I thought, Charlie looks like a well-fed angel or an archbishop, when he hasn't got his hand in your pocket.

It was a little hard to connect the bank cashier and big landowner with the bull-o'-the-woods on a construction job in an O. Henry banana republic of sixteen years ago, but as Charlie had said, he came here originally and had more or less inherited the bank job along with the bank stock and land when his father died.

I went on out. The next stop was a hardware store in the next block. It had a small sporting-goods department in the rear. I walked back and stared

owlishly at the half-dozen rifles and shotguns standing on a shelf behind the counter. In a minute a clerk came over.

"Yes, sir?" he said. "What can I do for you?"

"Oh," I said, "I was just wondering. When can you shoot jack rabbits?"

He smiled, a little pityingly. "Any time you see one, and got a gun."

"Then they don't have any closed season on them?"

"Nope. On cottontails, yes; but not on jacks."

You could see him thinking: Dumb dude.

"I see," I said. "Well, I'd like to buy a gun. A twenty-two."

"Sure." He reached back on the shelf and picked up a little slide-action pump. "This is a nice job." Then he stopped and looked at me with inspiration. "You really want to blow up some jacks? Let me show you something."

He put the .22 down on the counter and reached back again. This one was a bigger rifle with a long telescope sight.

"Look," he said. "Here's a job. It'll explode a jack at two hundred yards like a bowl of Jello. It's a two-twenty Swift, a custom deal with a ten-power scope. Man it was ordered for never did come back. I'd buy it myself if I had the money."

"How much is it?" I asked innocently.

"Let you have it for three hundred. It costs more."

I winced and shook my head. "I'll take the little one."

"Sure thing," he said, a little disappointed. "I guess you're right. This other one's too much gun unless you really got the fever."

I bought a box of .22 rifle ammunition, and as I started to leave, he said, "You can tell a jack from a cottontail, can't you? I mean, you got to have a license to hunt cottontails."

"Oh, certainly," I said. "I can distinguish them. Jack rabbits have longer ears."

When I was out on the sidewalk I shot a quick glance through the window. He was talking to another clerk and laughing.

I went out that afternoon with the rifle. Not too far from the highway I set up a rusty can for a target and shot at it for a while. Then I went for a walk, circling toward the dunes. When I came in I had two more boxes of sand in my coat pocket. I wrapped and addressed them in the cabin, exactly as I had before, and took them down to the post office the next morning.

I kept it up all the rest of the week. I spent most of every day wandering around in the dunes, carrying the gun and a little canteen of water, and when I came in I'd have the boxes of sand in the pocket of my coat. The next morning I'd mail them. On Thursday I deliberately skipped going to the post office, and on Friday I mailed five.

The rifle and jack-rabbit idea was a good one. They couldn't help wondering what kind of screwball it was who didn't have anything better to do than hunt jack rabbits. And from there it was only one jump to wondering what kind of stupid screwball it was who'd hunt for them in the only place in the county where there weren't any. There was no life of any kind in the sand dunes.

And there was one other angle to it. Goodwin belonged to a rifle club.

* * *

I had already located the rifle range. It was about a mile south of town, on a dirt road going toward the border. I went by it a couple of afternoons during my walks, but there was nobody shooting. I had an idea, though, there would be on Saturday or Sunday.

By the time Saturday came I was so full of the fact that I was going to see her that night that I had a hard time concentrating on anything. I went to the post office and mailed the two boxes. This time the clerk stared at me curiously, and when I went out two of the loafers who had been talking near the door broke off abruptly and fell into an awkward silence as I walked past. Somebody had begun to wonder if I was sending my laundry home a sock at a time.

After lunch I took the gun and started east of town on the highway, swung off it before I got to the dunes, and circled toward the rifle range. Before I got there I could hear the big rifles. It was an open flat with a low ridge about four hundred yards behind it to stop the lead. As I came across the road I could see there were four of them taking turns on the firing line, shooting at a two-hundred-yard target. They had a spotting scope set up to check the shots.

When I got near enough to see them, I knew I was in luck. One of them was Goodwin. Another was the clerk from the hardware store. I didn't

know the other two. I sat down on the ground well back out of the way and just watched, smoking a cigarette.

The clerk looked back after a while, and when he recognized me he grinned. “Got any jacks yet?” he asked.

“Not a one,” I said. “Can’t seem to hit them.”

“They’re tricky.”

He came over in a few minutes and asked for a light. “Your name’s Reichert, isn’t it?”

“That’s right,” I said.

“Mine’s Carson.”

I got up and we shook hands. He called to Goodwin, who wasn’t shooting at the moment. “Hey, Howard, why don’t you let Reichert here shoot that bull gun once? I’m trying to sell him a rifle.”

Goodwin came over and I shook hands with him, keeping my face still. It wasn’t easy. There’s a lot of Spanish blood in the family.

He was very pleasant, and there was a quiet sort of self-possession about him. “Here,” he said. He slid a cartridge into the chamber of the gun and handed it to me. “Try it.”

“You don’t mind?”

He shook his head and smiled. “If I did, I wouldn’t have asked you.”

I walked over and lay prone on the sand, sliding my arm into the sling.

“You’ve shot them before?” It was more of a statement than a question.

“Only in the Army,” I said.

“Hold right on,” he said. “It’s sighted for two hundred.”

I didn’t ask him about the trigger pull. It was lighter than I’d expected, and I missed the bull. It didn’t matter. I didn’t want to look like a sharpshooter. I worked the bolt, throwing the empty shell out on the sand, and watched to see if he picked it up. He did.

“Oh, you save those?” I asked innocently.

He grinned. “Sure. I reload them.”

“You do?” I did a big take on it, as if I’d never heard of it.

“Yes. It’s cheaper. And you can put up just the load you want.”

“I never thought of that,” I said. “It sounds interesting.”

He agreed politely that it was, and I let it drop. To hurry now would be stupid and dangerous. But I had found the opening I was looking for.

Five

The night was still and cold, and the sand looked like snow in the moonlight. I flicked the cigarette lighter and looked at my watch. It was seven-ten.

I was standing near the highway about two miles east of town, where a dirt road turned off and ran south through the dunes I was supposed to meet her here at seven. Having her come into town would be too risky, since she had spent a week there talking to practically everyone in that phony survey of hers. We couldn't be seen together.

A few cars went past, going very fast. I waited. In about five minutes I saw one coming more slowly. I watched eagerly. It might be Cathy, looking for the turnoff. It was. I was on the inside of the turn so the lights wouldn't swing across me, just in case it was somebody else. The car pulled off and stopped twenty or thirty yards from the highway. I could see the Cadillac fishtails and the New York license plates. I jumped into the ruts and started trotting toward her.

The second pair of lights almost hit me. Out of the corner of my eye I saw them swinging as the other car made the turn, faster than she had, and I dived for the brush. I made it off the left side of the road just as they straightened out and spattered against the rear of the Cadillac. And then the car was beyond me and sliding to a stop almost bumper to bumper with hers.

I came to my feet and onto the road, running toward them. There had been no time to think. It might be Charlie or Bolton, or both—but why another car? They'd have been with her. I couldn't even make myself say the other name. I was still eight or ten yards away, running desperately and silently on the sand, when the car door opened and a man got out. He was a small black figure in the moonlight and he was carrying something in his hand.

"All right, sweetie," he said. "Pile out."

I heard the low-throated rumble of power as she gunned the Cadillac. The rear wheels spun for an instant and sand flew up like spray. He shouted something, and was bringing up the thing he held in his hand. Moonlight glinted on it. It was too big to be a revolver, and now he had both hands on it. I was still a long leap from him when I saw what it was. The car was moving now, at last, as he swung it, and then I fell on him.

I fell on him all over at once. It was like tackling an empty overcoat. He was just a bagful of light bones inside and he folded like a swatted spider. One barrel of the sawed-off shotgun went off with a roar as we crashed down, and then it was either under us or loose somewhere in the sand. I got to one knee, grabbed him by the shoulder, flipped him onto his back, and swung. He jerked and straightened out. It was Donnelly. In the moonlight he looked like a child who'd been starved to death.

I was raging, throwing my hands in every direction, trying to find the gun. It was right in front of me, oily-shining and black and deadly against the white gleam of the sand. I'd been to wild to see it. I grabbed it up and rammed the sawed-off barrels into his face. I heard a tooth let go so I shoved it, hard, and groped for the triggers. Then I thought a mountain lion had jumped on me.

My face was full of fur. I seemed to be wrapped in it. It was in my eyes and mouth, cool and suffocating and smelling faintly of perfume, and a voice was screaming in my ear. "Mike! No! Stop it, Mike!"

I had forgotten about her. She had her shoulder against my face and was trying to push me back while we grappled for the gun. I had sense enough left to throw it before we fell on it. Then I grabbed her.

"He tried to kill you!" I raged.

"You hot-headed Spanish idiot!"

"Are you hurt? Cathy, are you hurt?"

"No, I'm not hurt!"

"Well, stand back. Look the other way if you want to."

"Mike, stop it! Oh, my God, can't you see—"

"See what? He tried to kill you, didn't he?"

She straightened up, trying to get her breath. Her hair was wildly tousled and the big eyes were flashing angrily. "Listen, for the love of heaven, Mike. We've got more important things on our minds than that stupid hoodlum. Do you want to ruin everything?"

“You want to let him keep on till he gets lucky someday and hits you?” I asked furiously.

“He probably wasn’t trying to shoot me. He was trying to scare me. That’s how stupid he is.”

The anger was turning against her now. At bottom, of course, it wasn’t anger at all; it was fear. I’d been so scared when I saw him swinging that shotgun after her I was sick at my stomach now. “Well, do you mind,” I asked coldly, “if I unload his gun before I give it back to him? I mean, if I’m very careful not to scratch it?”

She was suddenly contrite. “I’m sorry, Mike,” she whispered. “Forgive me for screaming at you like that. But I didn’t want you to kill him. I was scared.”

I grabbed her. “You were scared?” That was as far as I got.

It was a few minutes before I thought of him. I looked down. “What are we going to do with this?” I said, and then suddenly became conscious of something I’d been hearing for the past minute or two. It was a freight train, laboring across the desert to the north of us. I heard it whistle for the yards at Wyecross. It was westbound, and it would probably stop there for water.

“Wait here,” I said to Cathy, and stooped down for him.

She put a hand on my arm. I turned, and I could see her eyes go wide in the moonlight. “What are you going to do? Mike, you’re not—”

“No,” I said. “You’re right. I’m just going to put him in the mail. It’ll only take a few minutes.”

I pulled his big overcoat together in front for a handle and picked him up like a bundle of old rags. He probably didn’t weigh over a hundred pounds. The door of the car was still open. I heaved him in and pushed him over, away from the wheel. He sagged, and I leaned him against the other door.

“Be careful, Mike,” she said anxiously.

The road was too narrow to turn around in, but there was enough moonlight to see my way out, backing. There were no cars in sight. I rammed out onto the highway, stopped, and shot ahead toward Wyecross. Just before I got into town I turned off to the right and went north toward the tracks. I could see the train and hear the brake shoes squealing as it slowed.

There wasn’t anything out here except an abandoned work train on a siding. The water tank and station were several hundred yards to my left. I

cut the lights and stopped. The freight was passing the other side of the cars on the siding, but I could hear it bumping and shuddering to a stop.

It won't be good, I thought, if I get caught loading something like this on a train. I got out of the car and looked carefully around. I could see the running lights of the caboose about a hundred yards away to my right, and a swinging lantern going up the other side of the train as a brakeman headed for the front end. He'd be past in a minute.

I opened the door and dragged Donnelly out. He was so limp he was hard to handle. I got him across my shoulder and hurried toward the work train. If I went around I'd pass too near the caboose, so the only thing to do was go under. I was panting now, and sweat was breaking out on my forehead. It was hard getting him up onto the roadbed with the ballast turning under my shoes.

I set him down at the end of one of the work cars. We were in shadow now, and I looked around again to be sure no one had seen me. The moonlit plain was empty except for Donnelly's car. As I bent down to roll him under the coupling between two cars he groaned and tried to sit up.

"What the hell?" he mumbled. Then he looked up. "Hey, you—"

"Remember me?" I asked, and swung. He didn't see the hand.

I massaged my hand and felt it for broken bones, then got down and rolled him between the rails. I crawled over the coupling and dragged him out on the other side. We were between the trains now, in deep shadow. Remembering the brakie, I squatted down on the ballast and looked for the lantern. It was far up near the front end.

I left him lying there and moved along the cars, looking for an empty. The third boxcar had a door open. I walked back and got him, letting his feet drag. The floor of the car was chest high, and I was getting tired now. I finally got him high enough and rolled him in. I took a long breath and leaned against the door for a moment, completely winded.

It took only a minute to slide the door in place, but I had to tug and push to get it positioned correctly so I could fasten the latch. Then I thought about the other one. It had been closed, but it might not be fastened. I ran to the end of the car and climbed through, across the coupling. The lantern was still far up at the other end of the train. I fastened the door and came back again.

Next stop, California, I thought, and then went back under the work train.

I ditched the car beside the highway near the dirt road, left the keys in it, and walked back to where she was. She was sitting in the Cadillac smoking a cigarette, and when she saw me coming she got out.

“Darling, is everything all right?”

“He’s on his way to Los Angeles in his private car,” I said. I walked over and picked up the gun and broke it to take out the two shells. Before I threw the unfired one into the brush, I looked at it, and it made me a little sick. It was a ten-gauge Magnum, with Number 2 shot. Anything hit at close range with that would look like a dish of raw hamburger. I buried the gun in the sand.

I walked back and stood looking at her. “Start giving,” I said. “I want to know about Donnelly.”

“Darling,” she said innocently, “I’ve already told you. He’s just a stupid thug who thinks he can scare money out of me.”

I caught the fur coat with both hands and pulled her toward me. “Don’t try any innocent double talk on me, you redheaded little hellcat. Maybe he can’t scare you, but he can scare me. I want to know who he is and why he’s following you, so we can do something about it. I saw him swinging that shotgun on you, and I don’t intend to go through that again. Not twice in one lifetime.”

“Mike,” she said softly, “you do still like me, don’t you?”

“Shut up,” I said.

“I’ve missed you so terribly.”

I shook her. “Who is Donnelly?”

“Mike, darling, it isn’t anything, really. He just claims Jeff owed him some money before he was killed, when those men held him up. He hasn’t got any proof of it, and I won’t pay it.”

It sounded fishy, and still it didn’t. At least one part of it rang true—that about not paying it. Anybody who tried to fast-talk her out of a buck was odds-on to kill himself before he got through if he really took it seriously. And then, somewhere in all the anger and the fear for her going around in my mind, I was conscious of that same old crazy question: How could you be this much in love with a girl you fought with all the time and who kept the world in perpetual uproar? But I was. God help me.

It must have made me angrier. “All right,” I said. “But how in hell does he manage to find you everywhere you go? He located you in New Orleans, and now out here in the middle of nowhere in this sand pile. How does he do it? Do you write to him or something?”

She gestured impatiently. “Who cares, Mike? I tell you, he’s just a cheap chiseler. Quit worrying about him. As for his finding me here, he probably just followed me from San Antonio.”

“Well, you’ve got to get out of San Antonio before he can get back there.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, Mike,” she flared up, “quit being such an old woman. We’ve got a job to do.” Here we go, I thought.

“Look, Cathy,” I said. “For the love of Pete, let’s quit knocking ourselves out, just for an hour or two, shall we? God knows why, but I’ve looked forward all week to seeing you. Maybe I’m just stupid that way. And in five minutes we’re going at each other like a couple of punch-drunk pugs. I’m sorry I lost my temper. It just scared me. Donnelly, I mean. Let’s try to forget the whole damn thing for a little while.”

“All right, Mike,” she said contritely. “I’m sorry too.”

We got back in the car and drove on down the road about a mile until we were out of sight of the highway and lost in the rolling white immensity of the sand. I saw the dry remains of an old mesquite, and broke off enough limbs to build a fire behind one of the dunes. There was a robe in the back of the car, and I spread it on the sand, up against the slope before the fire. It was beautiful and incredibly still in the wintry moonlight. It was wonderful. She had a bottle of champagne and a couple of glasses in the car. I opened it and we drank some of it, watching the fire and talking. Firelight was shining in her eyes, and she was still the most beautiful girl I had ever seen. It occurred to me that this was corny, that girls were always having firelight shine in their eyes while they turned beautiful, but when I tried to look at it objectively, nothing changed. She was still beautiful, and I was in love with her.

“How did we ever manage to make such a mess of things, Cathy?” I asked after a while. “Let’s go to El Paso for the weekend. Look, we could be married again.”

“That would be wonderful, Mike,” she said. “But not until after we get through here. You can’t leave now. This is too important to take any

chances.”

That about sums it up, I thought, trying to suppress the anger and not start another battle. Trifling incidentals like being blasted at with a ten-gauge shotgun, or brushing off a package-deal proposition and proposal, are entirely beside the point and can’t be allowed to interfere with the main objective. Nothing mattered except sandbagging Goodwin and then ganging up on Lachlan.

No, that wasn’t quite fair, I reminded myself. The thought of the two of them getting away with what they had done haunted me too, and if it didn’t ride me all the time the way it did her, it was probably because I was lazy and inclined to take the easy way. Maybe if I’d quit trying to pick her to pieces and take a good look at myself…Maybe I was the one who wasn’t so hot. I always let things slide.

“You see, don’t you, Mike?” she said. “I mean, that we’ve got to do this first?”

“All right,” I said wearily. “I just forgot for the moment that you’re the girl of destiny. I’ll take it up through channels.”

“You’re a lamb,” she said, making a face at me. “And I do love you. Why do you think I’m staying in San Antonio so I can be near you?”

“Well, don’t crowd me out of my side of the bed,” I said.

“Stop grumbling, darling. Now, tell me about Goodwin. I mean, could you detect any curiosity at all when you met him out there at the rifle range? And don’t forget, never hurry him. You have to play it hard to get all the way.”

Progress report and pep talk in the moonlight, I thought bitterly as I lay in bed in the bleak cabin afterward. Vice-president making a swing through the territory to keep the district managers on their toes. Damn her. But what about San Antonio that night? She could relax and be human when she wanted to.

I cursed myself. That was nice. So I was finding out all over again all the things I’d learned in two years of being married to her and a lifetime of knowing her, and now they were big revelations. We were just going around again. She was a whirlpool I was trapped in. I ground the cigarette savagely against the ash tray and tried to get back to Goodwin.

* * *

It began to break faster than I had expected. Little things tip you off. You turn your head suddenly while walking along the street and find the two people you have just passed are staring after you and talking. You come in the door and a sudden hush falls over a group of three or four men enjoying some joke along the counter in the restaurant. You get a lot of innocent-sounding and thinly disguised questions along with simple transactions like buying a pack of cigarettes or picking up your laundry. Are you going to work here? How do you like our town? Good, healthy climate, isn't it?

People were beginning to wonder what I was doing here.

And what in the name of God was in those boxes I mailed every day?

On Tuesday I mailed four of them. The clerk at the window smiled. "You're our best customer," he said, with a lame attempt at joking. "We ought to give you a rate."

"Oh?" I said coldly.

During the week I dropped into the bank a couple of times to cash small checks, and both times Goodwin looked up from his paper work to nod and smile. And then, on Saturday, I got another break. Taking a chance he'd be out at the rifle range, I put two of the larger boxes in my coat pocket before I took off on my daily walk east of town. Filled with sand, they weighed over five pounds each.

Late in the afternoon I circled around to the rifle range. I was in luck. Goodwin was there, with two other men. I leaned my .22 against a mesquite and sat down to watch them. After a while Goodwin asked me if I'd like to try the gun again. Before I shot, I took off the coat with its bulging pockets and left it by the .22.

When the session broke up he offered me a lift back to town, as I had hoped. I put the rifle and coat on the back seat and got in up front with him.

"Well, how do you like our town?" he asked, as we wound through the mesquite on the little dirt road.

"Just fine," I said. "It's just what I was looking for."

He didn't ask me what it was I was looking for. I didn't think he would. He was by nature rather reserved himself, apparently well educated, and had better manners than the town loafers and most of the other natives. He might be curious, but he wouldn't pry.

“We’re trying to build up our rifle club,” he said. “How’d you like to join?”

I hesitated a little. “Thanks,” I said. “It sounds fine, but I’ll be frank with you. Those guns are a little steep for me right now.”

He nodded. “Yes, they are pretty expensive. But it’s a fine hobby, and keeps you out in the open.” He stopped suddenly, as if he’d said more than he intended.

I knew then it was beginning to work. He’d thought about me. And he’d decided it was health that brought me here, or rather the lack of it. The next thing, of course, was to make him wonder if that was it.

“Well anyway,” he said, “come on out on Saturday afternoons and take a few shots with this gun of mine.”

We were in town now, but he ran on out to the end of the street and dropped me off in front of the motel. I thanked him and got out, purposely not looking toward the back seat where I’d left the rifle and coat.

He started to drive off. “Oh,” I called out, waving my arm and running toward the car. “I forgot my stuff.”

“Sure thing,” he said. He turned around in the seat and reached for the coat, to pass it out the front window.

“No, that’s all right, I’ll get it,” I said hurriedly. I reached for the handle of the rear door, but let him beat me to it. He picked up the coat, and I saw his arm sag at the unexpected weight of it. Almost involuntarily his eyes swept down toward it, but there was nothing to see except the square outlines of the boxes in the pockets.

Six

In a couple of days he invited me out to the house. For dinner, he said, and he'd show me his workshop, where he did his reloading.

He had a nice place, a big two-story house out on the edge of town about three blocks off the main drag. I met his wife. She was a young blonde who wasn't as young or as blonde as she had been, but she was nice, and a wonderful cook. She did water colors, and she was a bullfight fan. I admired the landscapes she had done, and we had a good session with the corridas. I told her I'd lived in Mexico a couple of years, working for some company I never quite mentioned.

They had swallowed the idea by this time that I had come out here because my health had gone back on me, though we very pointedly never talked about it. I think they felt sorry for me. I knew, of course, that he'd also heard about the strange boxes I was always mailing, because everybody knows everything in a town of that size, but he didn't mention them.

I let it ride along about a week, going out in the dunes every day with the little gun, and continuing to mail the boxes. They had me out to the house again on Saturday night for dinner, and to return the compliment I took them to the restaurant and to the movies. We were getting quite chummy. They liked me, and, oddly enough, I liked them when I wasn't thinking about the thing he had done.

Cathy met me twice that week, but it was just the same old pep talk. She was wild to know how it was coming along, and full of suggestions as to what to do next.

It was near the end of the following week that I knew the time had come to let him have the stinger. I'd walked into the restaurant late one evening, and two men who were playing the pin-ball machine near the door didn't see me come in. I passed close behind them and as I went past I heard one of them say, "It's rabbit feet, I tell you. Don't he spend all his time huntin'

jack rabbits? He’s got a friend in New York sells ‘em for him.” I heard them laugh as I went over and sat down at the counter.

All right, boys, I thought, I’ll clear it up for you. After I’d eaten I went back to the motel and started getting it ready. I got out the bottle of sulphuric acid I’d brought from New Orleans and mixed a little with some water in a glass jar to the approximate strength of battery solution. Then, taking out a cardboard box—one of the larger ones—I wet it along the corners and seams with the solution and let it dry. Filling it with sand I’d brought in during the afternoon, I wrapped it with paper, tied the parcel with white string, and addressed it, just as I had done with all the others. To finish it off, I put a drop of the acid solution on the string in three or four different places, let it set for a minute or two, and wiped it off. It was ready.

In the morning I waited until after eleven before I started downtown with it, to be sure he’d be in the bank. I had to handle it carefully. He was at his desk, and he looked up and waved as I walked in. I set it down on the edge of the glass-topped stand, got out my checkbook, and started to write a check, keeping my left elbow near the parcel and taking a long time to make it out. It’d be a lot more effective if he came over, though it would work whether he did or not I was in luck. He did.

I heard the gate in the railing open and close, and then his footsteps coming up behind me. I tore the check out, paying no attention.

“Say, Reichert, Mrs. Goodwin told me to ask you out tonight for some frijoles and cabrito,” he said behind me as he came up.

I swung around. “Thanks. That sounds—” I began, just as my elbow hit the box and knocked it off. “Damn!” I said explosively, and lunged for it. It was too late. It hit the tile floor, and the acid-weakened box came apart across one side like a dropped squash. Sand spilled out onto the floor.

He looked down, and wasn’t able to control the amazement on his face. Then he looked at me. I flushed and stammered something, and then bent down hurriedly and began trying to scoop the sand back into the box, as if trying to cover up while I thought of something.

“I’m sorry about the mess,” I said uncomfortably, when I stood up. “It’s—well, you see, my niece, back in New York, she’s bedridden. I was sending her this box of sand to—well, she colors it, you see, and uses it in a sort of Navajo sand-painting idea.”

“Oh, I see,” he said in a tone that meant he didn’t see at all. “Well, don’t bother with it. The janitor’ll clean it up. It’s too bad it broke, though.” He paused, then tried an embarrassed joke. “One thing about it, you can find plenty more around here.”

I managed a hollow grin. “Yes, that’s right, isn’t it?”

I went back to the motel with the remains of the box. It had gone off beautifully. He knew I was lying, of course. That was the most obvious part of it. And then, after an hour or so, he’d probably decide I wasn’t crazy, in spite of the way it looked. It would really begin to get him about that time.

Try it, pal, I thought. It’s not as direct as diluting a concrete mix, but it’s interesting when you work on it—and tricky.

* * *

I called up and begged off on the dinner date. I said I had a bad headache.

The next day was Friday. I didn’t go out to the dunes at all, or mail anything at the post office. Saturday was the same. I sat around the drugstore most of the time, reading all the new magazines. I didn’t even go out to the rifle range.

Sunday morning I decided I’d let him wait long enough, and I could try it. This time, instead of taking any boxes, I stuffed my pocket with about a dozen little cloth bags like tobacco sacks, a bunch of string, and some tags. I took the gun and walked east on the highway, the way I always did, left it before I hit the sand dunes, and circled to get into them some distance from the road.

This was a phase of it now that I didn’t have much control over. If I’d played it right up to this point, I should have him now. He should be ready to go along with me. I was doing something crazy, something he couldn’t figure out, and I was doing it on his land. The fact that it was his land and that I not only hadn’t told him about it but had actually lied about it should be enough to overcome his natural reluctance toward spying on anybody. If I’d guessed it right, it would be Frankie or Johnnie who’d let him know when I went out there again.

As I wandered around I kept watching the highway. Time went by and I didn’t see anything of him. After a while I began to worry. Had I bungled

the whole thing? Hadn't I made him curious as to what I was up to? If he wasn't interested now, the whole thing was a fizzle.

In another quarter hour I was sure it had gone sour. And then I saw a car that could have been his coming down the highway. I watched it out of the corner of my eye. It went behind some scraggly mesquites growing along the fence, and it didn't come out. I felt a tingle of excitement. We were getting him.

In a moment I saw the glint of sunlight on something near the end of the mesquites. I knew what that was. He had the spotting scope with him. It was a twenty-power job, and with it he could see what I was doing as well as if he were sitting in my lap. I began pacing, taking long steps like a man measuring something. At the end of twenty strides I squatted down, scooped up some sand, put it in one of the bags, and tied it. Then I fastened on a tag and made a show of writing something on it. Of course, he couldn't see the tag, but it'd take him only a few minutes to figure it out.

I took twenty steps more and repeated the whole thing. I was going toward him all the time, but before I began to get near enough to scare him I turned ninety degrees and paced off the next twenty parallel to the highway. After tagging this bag and putting it into my pocket I made another right-angled turn, away from him.

He'd know now. Anybody with even normal intelligence could see what I was doing. I was laying out the whole area in an immense grid and picking up a sample of sand every twenty yards. It was completely systematic.

I went on two or three more laps and then sat down on a sand dune with my back to him to eat my sandwich and give him a chance to get away.

All right, pal, I thought, it's up to you now.

* * *

I didn't have long to wait. About four o'clock Monday afternoon Frankie or Johnnie came back to the cabin and said I was wanted on the telephone. I went up to the office. It was Goodwin, all right.

"Mrs. Goodwin and I wondered if you'd like to come out and try potluck with us this evening if you're free," he said.

"Oh," I said hesitantly. "Uh—Thank you very much."

“About seven, then.”

“That would be nice.”

I wondered how well I’d carry it off. This was tricky, and Goodwin was no fool. There was one thing in my favor, however, the same thing there had been all the time, and that was that there couldn’t possibly be any reason for my trying to kid him. He owned the land, didn’t he?

I dug the letter out of the bag, stuck it in my pocket, and walked over to Goodwin’s. The moon wasn’t up yet, and it was cold and dark and my heels rang on the sidewalk. Goodwin let me in, and we went into the living room. There was a nice blaze going in the fireplace. Mrs. Goodwin came in with some drinks on a tray and we all sat down.

I had to beat him to the punch, to make it look better, but I had to be sure he was ready, that he had figured it out. I was making a big show of being intensely preoccupied with something and under a bad strain. During the few minutes of small talk over the drinks I appeared not to hear half that was said to me and was always waking up with an “Oh? I’m sorry…Beg pardon?” I had something on my mind, and I was burning. They could see it. Or I hoped they could; I wasn’t too sure I’d ever win an Academy Award with it.

He waited until she left the room to see about dinner. The minute she was gone he put down his glass, lit a cigar, and looked across at me with a probing glance that meant business.

“There’s something I want to talk to you about, Reichert,” he said.

Well, here we go, I thought. I broke in on him. “There’s something I’ve got to tell you, too. I’ve been trying to make up my mind about it all day. I suppose you’d call it a question of loyalty to the people you work for, and just how far that loyalty is supposed to stretch before it breaks.”

“And who is it you work for?” he asked.

“Occidental Glass,” I said.

He made an impatient gesture with his hand, and swore under his breath. “That was the thing I never could get,” he said. “Glass. It was just so obvious, I guess, I couldn’t see it.”

I jerked my head up and looked at him. “Then you knew what I was doing?” I asked in surprise.

He smiled. “You’re probably a good engineer, Reichert, but you’ll never set the world on fire as an undercover investigator. You give yourself away

everywhere you turn."

"Oh?" I said uncomfortably. "Well, what I wanted to tell you was that I'm not working for them any more. I've sent in my resignation."

"Why?" he asked.

"For two reasons. The first is that I couldn't tell you what I'm going to, as long as I'm drawing their pay. But the big one is that they've backed down on a promise they made me. If this thing proved up and we built a plant here, I was supposed to have a free hand with the whole design, and I was to have complete charge of production." I fished out the letter. Charlie had written it, and where he'd got the Occidental Glass Company letterhead only Charlie would know. "Apparently office politics got in the way."

I passed it over to him. "Take a look at that last paragraph. They're 'very sorry, but...'"

He read it, glanced again at the letterhead, and handed it back. "It's a rotten deal," he said. "And I'm sorry, Reichert."

I nodded, waiting. In about a minute he ought to get past my sob story to the real news. He did. His eyes jerked around to me again and he said, "But what about the plant? Are they going to put one up? Here?"

I stared at him, took a sip of my drink, and put it down, taking my time all the way. "If they don't," I said, "somebody else will. That's what I wanted to tell you. You've been a good friend since I've been here, and after the deal they've handed me I don't see that I owe them enough to help them hand you the same one."

"You mean—that exploration work you did, it proved up?"

I nodded. "You can just about name your own price for that sand deposit. Within reason, of course."

It's just as Charlie says. No matter who they are, the minute you dangle the big money in front of them they begin to get the fever. Anybody will go for it, if you make it look right.

"Are you sure?" he asked, trying to keep down the excitement in his voice. "I mean, it looks like any sand."

"They didn't want it back at the lab just to look at. If they wanted to look at sand they could go out to Coney Island."

"Then the lab reports were good? But why? I mean, what makes it valuable?"

“It’s technical,” I said. “But what it boils down to is a question of purity; that is, the ratio of silica to foreign matter and undesirable grit, dust, organic matter, and so on. They’re working on a new line of high-silica glass—that’s the stuff with the low coefficient of expansion—and this sand of yours out here is made to order for it. Of course, it isn’t pure silica, because sand deposits like that don’t exist, but it’s so near it’s unbelievable. They’ll go plenty high to get it.”

He was leaning forward, staring at me. “How high do you think they’ll go?”

“They’ll cry, but you can get a quarter of a million for it.” He whistled. “My God, Reichert.” Then the businessman began to take hold again. “But why did you tell me? I mean, what’s your deal?”

I shrugged. “No deal. I don’t like what they did to me, and since I’m not working for them any more, I’d like to see you get what it’s worth. Of course, I’m not implying they were going to steal it from you, or anything like that, but they probably won’t offer over fifty thousand until you make them come across.”

“Well, don’t think I won’t remember it. I mean, if it comes off and I get anything like that for it. But do you think they’ll try to get in touch with me?”

“Of course,” I said. “And it won’t be long. I’ll tell you why. My resignation’s already in the mail, and when they get that they’ll be out here as if their clothes were on fire. You see what I’m driving at? There are several things I could do. I could buy an option on the land myself. Or, what’s more likely, since I don’t have that kind of money, I’ll go to work for some other glass company, and let them in on it in return for the job Occidental was supposed to give me.”

“By God, you’re right,” he said. “They couldn’t take a chance, with what you know about it.” It was that easy.

Early the next morning I sent off the corny telegram to Charlie’s address in Houston. “Congratulations to the lucky couple. May all your troubles be little ones.” That was the code for him to call his friend in New York, who’d wire Goodwin from there that the head of the Occidental Glass Company’s legal department, who was en route to the West Coast, would like to stop off in Wyecross and discuss a business matter.

It was like shooting quail on the ground. Wednesday night Goodwin called me, full of excitement and almost sputtering. He'd received the wire from New York, all right, and then another from the lawyer himself, from Houston. He'd be in on the nine a.m. Westbound next day.

"All right," I said. "You're a businessman. You know what to do when you hold a hand like that."

"Yes," he said happily. "You bet I do."

I was looking out the window of the drugstore the next morning after the train came in and saw Goodwin go by with him. Bolton looked like the legal department of Fort Knox, in a camel's-hair coat that probably cost as much as a small car.

He had to stay all day, since there wasn't another train until nine p.m. About nine-fifteen Goodwin called. He'd just got back from the station, seeing him off. "I did it," he said, a little wildly.

"Good for you," I said.

"He knew you'd told me, but there wasn't anything he could do. He'd probably have killed you if he could have found you. I started him off at three hundred thousand, and he finally gave up at two-seventy-five."

"The deal already made?" I asked.

"Not yet. They have to have a meeting of the board. But he says it's almost certain to go through. They've got an option on it at that price, for ten days."

"Fine," I said. "That'll give you just about time enough to have your title searched. Then you're in."

I put that in to help him along. He still hadn't got it. He was going to, as soon as it soaked in, and as I said, it was poison. It could kill you if you had a bad heart. It wasn't until the next afternoon around three that it finally got to him. He called me at the motel.

"Reichert," he said wildly, "can you get over here right away? Something terrible's come up, and I've got to have some advice. I'm trying to get hold of my lawyer now, and maybe he'll be here by the time you are."

"Sure," I said. "I'll be right over."

He'd remembered it at last. The land was his, all right, and the title was clear, but about five months ago he'd sold the oil rights to a lease speculator by the name of Wallace Caffery.

The thing that made it bad was that the lease said “mineral rights.” And Wallace Caffery, of course, was Wolford Charles.

Seven

It wasn't as dumb as it looked, and actually he probably hadn't forgotten it at all. It was just that it didn't matter. Land was often sold without the mineral rights, which around here meant simply oil, as that was the only mineral they had. Occidental Glass just wanted the sand. And sand wasn't a mineral. Was it? Was it?

The lawyer was already there by the time I made it. They had a copy of the contract out, and Goodwin was slowly going crazy. The lawyer explained it to me.

"I'd have to look it up before I could say definitely," he told Goodwin, "but just offhand I'd say you haven't got a chance." He turned to me again. "What is sand, Reichert? Technically, I mean. Rock, isn't it? Silicia—sil-something.

"Silicon," I said, praying Charlie's coaching wouldn't go back on me now. "Actually, it's the oxide. Silicon dioxide is the correct name for it. Its nonorganic, of course. Physically, it's nothing but small fragments of quartz."

The lawyer shook his head. "There goes your ball game. Quartz is mineral to anybody."

It was murder. Just a little matter of $275,000 thrown out the window for the miserable handful of chicken feed Caffery'd given him for the oil rights on land where there'd never been any oil and never would be any because there were two dry holes on it already. You could see it in his face. The eyes were beginning to look haunted. Pal, I thought, it took a long time, but how does it feel?

His only hope, of course, was to find Caffery and buy back the lease. And he had just ten days to do it. The only thing he knew was that Caffery was a small-time speculator and wildcatter who operated out of a hole-in-the-wall office in Houston when he wasn't operating out of his suitcase. He

grabbed the next train east. He was gone two days, and when he came back his eyes were no longer haunted. They were wild. His face was haggard.

He'd found Caffery, all right. And Caffery had just laughed at him. So there'd been some big oil-company geologists snooping around the land, and now he wanted to pull a fast one and get it back? Fat chance.

If I hadn't kept reminding myself of the thing he'd helped do to my father and Dunbar, I'd have felt sorry for him. He could lose his sanity. It was more wealth than he'd ever dreamed of, and it was lying just beyond his outstretched fingers in a nightmare where he couldn't move.

That was Monday. He kept calling Caffery and getting the brush-off every day until Thursday, when some girl who answered the phone said Caffery had gone out of town and she didn't know where he was or when he'd be back. You had to admit it; Charlie was a genius. It was magnificent. The final turn of the screw came within an hour or two after that last, useless telephone call. It was a telegram from El Paso, sent by Bolton, of course. He had received instructions from the president of Occidental Glass to take up the option, and would be in town on the nine-thirty eastbound Friday night with a certified check for $275,000. If you'd touched Goodwin he'd have twanged like a bowstring, or blown up before your eyes.

I was at his house when it came, and it was an awful thing to watch. He had to fight himself to keep from babbling and becoming incoherent when he talked. He was sweating as he called Houston again. He asked me to listen in on the extension, just in case Caffery was there, so I could see if I could detect any signs of weakening. The stupid girl popped chewing gum in his ear. Mr. Caffery? No, he was still out of town. But wait, come to think of it, he had called in from some little town just about an hour ago. She thought he was down there where he was drilling an oilcat well. No, she was trying to think of the name of the town, but she couldn't remember it. It sounded like Snookum. Was there a town that sounded like Snookum? It was on the coast somewhere, not too far from Houston—she thought. There was something familiar about her voice, even under the seven layers of stupidity.

I got off the extension and we both started tearing wildly through road maps, looking for it, while Goodwin kept the long-distance line open. We couldn't locate anything that looked like it. Goodwin went back on the phone and pleaded with her. Couldn't she possibly think of it?

Oh, yes, she said; she'd just remembered. She had written it down and forgotten she had. And wasn't it funny, it didn't sound like Snookum at all. It sounded like Cuddly. The name of the town was Ludley. Mr. Caffery would be at the hotel there. There was only one hotel, she thought. Oh, you're welcome, she said sweetly, and popped her gum. God, I thought, Charlie must have hired Shirley Booth for the job. Then it rang on me at last. It was Cathy.

So she was in San Antonio, was she? So she could be near me? I tried to stifle the red blaze of anger.

Goodwin finally got through to the hotel at Ludley. Caffery was out. Then, the next time, his line was busy. I listened in on the extension when he got through to him at last.

It sounded as if a battle was going on in the hotel room, or they were having a stevedores' union meeting. If Charlie was making all the noise alone, he should have been a one-man band.

"Hello! Hello! Yes, Caffery speaking," he yelled. "Who is it? Who? Goodwin? What the hell do you want?…Wait a minute! Wait a minute!" His voice became muffled, as if he'd put a hand over the transmitter, but we could still hear him. "Pipe down! Give me a chance to answer the phone. You'll get your money."

Then he was back on the line. "Who is this now? Oh, Goodwin." He broke into a string of profanity. "How many times do I have to tell you? It's not for sale. I wouldn't take a hundred thousand. What!" This last was apparently for somebody in the room. We could hear his voice going on, muffled. "Look, this is none of your business. I told you I'd get it, and I'll do it. Go on out there and start fishing for that bit. I tell you my credit'll be good anywhere in the state the minute we bring it in."

He was yelling into the telephone again. "Look, Goodwin, where can I get hold of you if I have to? Will you be at home? All right! All right! But don't call me again. I'm busy." He hung up.

Goodwin was limp and ready to collapse over the table. "What do you think, Reichert?" was all he could say.

"I don't know," I said. "I think he's in a jam himself, from the way it sounds. Sweat it out. I've got a hunch he'll come to you." Some hunch, I thought. Charlie was due to make his appearance just after eight tomorrow morning, according to the schedule.

It was all over except tying up the loose ends and actually getting the money, and it was time to be getting ready to run. Bolton was already in the clear, of course, since he was in El Paso. As soon as Charlie got his hands on the cash, he'd head for El Paso, and Cathy was to come by from San Antonio at noon of the day we pulled it off and pick me up, and we'd meet them in El Paso at the hotel. We'd split up and be out of the state before Goodwin got wise, which would be when he met the train Friday at nine-thirty and there was nobody on it.

* * *

Mrs. Goodwin called me the next morning around seven-thirty. Would I come over and just talk to Goodwin? He'd been up all night, waiting for a call from Caffery, and there hadn't been any. Maybe I could help her calm him down before he collapsed.

I went over in a hurry, knowing Charlie'd be there at eight. Goodwin was on the telephone again, haggard and hollow-eyed. He had the hotel at Ludley, but Caffery had checked out. He put the phone back in its cradle, let out a long, hopeless sigh, and put his head down in his hands. He was whipped.

I was looking out the window when the mud-spattered car drove up in front of the house. I saw Charlie get out, and put my hand on Goodwin's shoulder. "Say, is this your man?" I nodded toward the street.

He came alive as if I'd prodded him with a high-voltage cable. "Hell, yes," he said excitedly, springing up. "But you'll have to get out of sight. We don't want to make him any more suspicious than he is now. I'll tell you. Go up there at the head of the stairs."

I made it just as the doorbell rang. By peeking around the corner of the landing, I could see them. Charlie was wearing khaki pants and boots and a leather jacket with mud on it, and he looked as if he hadn't shaved for three days or slept a week. His eyes were red, and there were lines of weariness around his mouth. Charlie was a perfectionist.

He was magnificent. Watching him and listening, I was conscious of thinking what an actor the stage lost when Charlie became a crook. He was being crucified. Nobody kept faith with him. Goodwin was taking advantage of him. He'd bought the lease in good faith, and now Goodwin

had found out some oil company wanted it, and his creditors were hounding him, and…He could make you cry.

He said eighty thousand. Goodwin, recovering a little of his business sense now that there was hope, said thirty. They went at it again. Charlie came to a dead standstill at sixty-five thousand, and Goodwin finally had to meet it. Then Charlie said it had to be in cash, and he had to have it within an hour so he could get started back to the well. Goodwin agreed, but said it would take two hours. The bank wouldn't be open until ten.

Charlie nodded. "All right," he said wearily. Then he went on, with great bitterness. "Don't think I don't know what you're doing to me. Some big oil company wants to put down a well out there, don't they? Well, brother, you couldn't have beat me if we hadn't lost a bit in that hole last week."

To calm him, Mrs. Goodwin asked him to come out in the kitchen and have a cup of coffee. I sneaked down the stairs and left as soon as they were out of the room. When I was out in the street I let out a big sigh. I was weak myself.

Back at the motel I started throwing things in the two bags. She'd be here at twelve. I stopped, thinking how it would be now, with nothing to keep us apart. On our way to San Francisco, to hunt down Lachlan, we'd stop off in Reno as we'd planned. We would be married. I looked at my watch. It was only nine-fifteen. Keep your shirt on, I thought; Charlie hasn't even got the money yet.

At a quarter to eleven Goodwin called. He was almost hysterical with joy. "I'd ask you to come over, if it weren't that you're probably worn out too. I'd like for you to see this lease burning up in the fireplace."

"So it's all set?" I asked.

"He just left, five minutes ago. Boy, talk about your photo finishes! And, say, Reichert, don't think I'm going to forget you for all you've done."

No, you probably won't, pal, I thought, as I hung up—any more than I've forgotten you. It's going to be a little rugged around nine-thirty tonight when nobody gets off that train.

I was all packed. By eleven-thirty I was straining my ears for the sound of tires on the gravel outside. About ten minutes to twelve I heard a car come swinging in. I jumped up and threw the door open. It was somebody else. I sat down again, feeling the impatience mount.

By twelve-thirty I was chain-smoking cigarettes and wearing a path in the shabby rug. God knows she'd never been anywhere on time in her life, but she couldn't be late today. This was the day we'd been looking forward to for nearly a month. We had to get going.

She didn't come. It was two o'clock. It was three. I'd long since passed the stage where I could sit still at all. I felt as if all the nerves in my body had worked through and were on the outside of my skin. She was dead. She'd been killed in a wreck. I couldn't keep Donnelly out of my mind. She wouldn't listen to me, so he had gone back and found her. He'd killed her. I thought of that ten-gauge shotgun, and shuddered. He was capable of anything. Why hadn't I made her listen?

No, how did I know where she'd been? She'd said she was going to be in San Antonio, and still that was her voice over the phone from Houston.

How could I even find out what had happened? I had to get back there some way. It wasn't until then that the whole thing balled up and hit me. I sat down on the bed, feeling the weakness and the sick feeling come up through me. I'd been worried only about her, but what about myself, too? I couldn't go anywhere. I was trapped. She might be all right, but I was a sitting duck.

The bus had gone through twenty minutes ago, and there wouldn't be another one in either direction until eleven o'clock tonight. And by nine-thirty Goodwin would know he had been taken.

It was about as near to complete panic as I'd ever been. For a few minutes I couldn't think at all. The only thing my mind could get hold of was that I was the sucker, the fall guy, the one they'd thrown to the wolves. They'd gone off and left me. No, I tried to tell myself, she wouldn't. She wouldn't have left me stranded like this. But that meant, then, that something had happened to her.

I tried to calm down. I was in danger enough, without losing my head completely. There'd be the westbound train through at nine. But what good would that do me? Goodwin would probably already be at the station, waiting to meet the eastbound. Or if he wasn't, at least a dozen people would see me get on it. As soon as they told him, he'd know the truth, and police would be waiting for me at some station up the line before I got to El Paso. Even if there were a bus through, the same thing would happen.

Time went on in its slow crawl around the rim of my watch. There was no hope now that she was coming. It was four-fifteen. I watched the small oblong of yellow sunlight from the window creep up the wall as the sun went down. It was like sitting in a cell. I shuddered.

I couldn't just sit there and wait for them. I'd have to snake a run for it some way. Maybe I could hitch a ride if I got out on the highway. Then I thought of it—that freight, the one I'd put Donnelly on. It would be along, westbound, a little after seven.

But I had to get away and get on it without being seen. The only way to do it was just to fade, and let them wonder afterward when I'd left and which way I'd gone. The only trouble, however, was that there was no way out of here except the drive and archway in front. The cabins and garages were joined in a solid wall all the way around. I'd have to leave the bags. No, there was a way to do it. The bathroom had a small window that looked out onto the open prairie to the east.

I sweated out another hour and a half until it was dark. I looked carefully around the harsh little cubicle to be sure I hadn't left anything that would identify me. The only things were the .22 rifle and the rest of the sand boxes. I put on the topcoat, carried the bags into the bathroom, and cut the lights.

I opened the window and then waited while my eyes became accustomed to the darkness. Two or three cabins up the line there was light pouring from a window, and I could hear a radio playing. When I could see a little in the faint light from the stars, I eased out the window feet first, and then lifted the bags out. I closed the window very gently and slipped away, angling a little to my right to stay clear of the highway.

It was slow going, dodging the clumps of mesquite and prickly pears, but I was in the clear and nobody had seen me leave. After about two hundred yards I swung toward the highway again. It was frosty and still, and in the cold starlight I could see the fog of my breath. I waited beside the road until no cars were in sight, then hurried across and into the desert on the other side.

It was about a half mile to the tracks. The suitcases were heavy, and I stopped once or twice to catch my breath. I tried not to think about Cathy. Every time I saw her I saw Donnelly swinging that murderous shotgun and I'd feel sick. I thought of Charlie and Bolton, safe in El Paso with $65,000

in their pockets, laughing probably, while I struggled through the cactus to catch a freight that might get me out of town before the whole thing caved in on me. Rage would come boiling up and take me by the throat. I'd done the job, and now they'd run out on me.

It didn't make sense. Sure, they didn't care what happened to me, but didn't they have brains enough to know I'd talk if the police caught me? Talk? I'd scream. I'd sing like a nightingale. But then, what difference would it make to them? They'd be gone, and you can do a lot of traveling with sixty-five thousand dollars.

I set the bags down for a minute and thought about it very coldly. If I didn't get caught, they were going to need a railroad ticket a lot longer than that.

When I hit the old work train, I swung around the end of it. I walked up to it about where I'd boosted Donnelly onto the freight, and ducked in between two cars. I set the bags down and flipped the cigarette lighter to look at my watch. It should be along in about a half hour.

Eight

It was a night that would never end. I sat on the suitcases in a dusty boxcar that rattled through cold darkness and then jolted and screeched to interminable stops every thirty or forty miles. When I couldn't stand the cold any longer I'd get up and walk back and forth, swinging my arms and blowing on my hands. I ran out of cigarettes. I tried to keep the worry about Cathy from driving me crazy. The terrible part of it was that maybe I'd never know what happened. I had to run, and I couldn't look back or wait.

I thought of Bolton. And I thought of Charlie.

Maybe it was the anger that kept me from freezing.

Just at dawn we slowed for the yards at El Paso. I tossed the two bags out and jumped. After I'd picked them up I hurried out of the yards. Nobody saw me. There was an all-night cafe open on the second street. I went in, ordered some coffee, and bought a package of cigarettes. I called a cab.

"Bus station," I said when it came. The sun was coming up now. Maybe the bus and railroad stations were being watched, but I had to take a chance on it. There was no other way. I'd already thrown away the steel-rimmed glasses, which helped a little, and I was dressed differently than I had been in Wyecross. There weren't many people around this early in the morning. I shot a quick glance around, ready to ease out, but there wasn't anybody who looked like a plain-clothes cop. I checked the bags and went into the washroom to clean up a little and beat some of the dust out of my topcoat. I counted the money I had left. It was less than two hundred dollars. I had to get to Reno. Manners would give me a job, dealing dice. And Reno would be far enough away.

There would be a westbound bus leaving in an hour and ten minutes. I'd better not hang around the bus station, though, in case they were shaking it down now and then. I went out in the street and thought of Bolton and Charlie again and felt the rage take hold of me. There wouldn't be a chance

they'd still be here, but I went into a drugstore telephone booth and started calling the hotels.

After I'd called three I gave up. Even if they were here they wouldn't be registered under their own names. The thing to do was forget them until I got out of this jam. I tried to. It wasn't much good.

It was too early to get a shave. I went into a hotel coffee shop to try to eat a little breakfast before bus time. I've got to quit looking behind me, I thought. The way I was acting was enough to make a cop suspicious even if he'd never heard of me.

The waitress at this end of the counter was slow getting to me because she was working on an order a bellboy was waiting for. I started to get up to go out to the newsstand for a paper while I was waiting. Maybe there'd be something about it in the papers. Then I looked back at the waitress for some reason I couldn't figure out. What was it? I saw it then. It was the order. It was the two halves of a Persian melon and a big silver pot of coffee.

What if the odds were a thousand to one against it? I didn't even stop to think. I followed the boy across the lobby and into the elevator. When he got out on the fourth floor I went in the other direction, pretending to be looking for a number, until he was halfway down the corridor. I turned then and watched him. He knocked at a door and in a minute it opened and he went in. I walked past it and looked at the number, and went on around the corner. When I heard him come out and get into the elevator again I went back.

It was dangerous. It was a stupid thing to do. We were all wanted by the police now, and the surest way in the world to bring them down on us was to start a brawl. But there wasn't room in my mind for thought. I knocked on the door.

"Who is it?" someone asked.

"Room Service," I said. "I forgot..." I let it trail off.

The door opened a crack. I saw the baby-blue eyes and the pink jowls, and I shoved, hard. Charlie was still off balance when I got in through the door and I put a hand in his face and pushed. He shot back into the table the boy had set up. The whole thing crashed down.

I kicked the door shut and swung at Bolton. He made an agonized sucking noise as the fist slammed into his stomach, but he was tougher than

Charlie. He dropped the cup of coffee he was holding and belted me. I shook my head groggily as I slammed back into the door. Charlie was trying to get up, tangled in a white tablecloth with his hand in the melon. Bolton hit me again and I went down. He was a terrific right-handed puncher. I saw the foot coming for my face and grabbed at it. I got an arm around the other leg and heaved, straining with all the strength I had left. He came down on top of me.

Somewhere in all the wildness I could hear Charlie crying in an outraged and quivering voice. “Mike! What is the meaning of all this stupid violence?” I rolled and got Bolton off me, and when he started to get up I hit him. The shock numbed my hand. I hit him again. Blood trickled out of his mouth. He swayed dizzily and fell backward onto the floor. He wasn’t knocked out, but all he could do was keep picking at the rug, trying to get a handhold on something to pull himself up. I was wild, and almost as groggy as he was. I stood up. Charlie was still trying to say something. I pushed him and he fell over Bolton.

I looked around. Their bags were all packed, standing by the door with their folded overcoats on them. In another few minutes they’d have been gone. Mexico City or Acapulco, I thought. I pulled a leg off the wreckage of the table and said, “All right, we’re going to have a meeting. We’re going to elect a new sucker.”

I didn’t get what it was at first. The next time around, I did. It was a knock at the door. I don’t know why I opened it, unless I was still a little punchy. My head cleared then, very fast. It was Cathy. She was just standing there, white-faced, and when she looked at me she didn’t say anything at all. She didn’t have to. When I looked beyond her I knew I had waited too long.

There were two of them and they were wearing white frontier-style hats and gun holsters, and one of them was holding her by the arm.

They came on in, pushing her ahead of them. They looked around, and then at each other, and grinned. “Well, this is a cozy little group,” the tall one with the pale eyes said. “Looks like His Royal Highness, Prince Charlie, and the one with the bent face must be Judd Bolton, alias Major Ballantine.”

He swung his eyes around to me. “Drop it, friend.” He meant the table leg. I dropped it. I couldn’t say anything.

“All right, boys, on your feet,” he said to Charlie and Bolton. “Shake ‘em down, Jim.”

The other cop came over behind us and patted us under the arms and down the sides. “They’re clean, Shandy.”

Charlie made a try at the outraged taxpayer. “I demand to know the meaning of this. And who is this young lady? I’ve never—”

Cathy turned on all of us, her eyes blazing with contempt. “You stupid, blundering idiots!”

Bolton lashed at her. “Why, you little fool! Why’d you bring ‘em here?”

“All right, all right. Simmer down, boys and girls,” the one called Shandy said. He was a great kidder, but none of it ever got as far as his eyes. “Keep an eye on ‘em, Jim, while I go through the suitcases.”

I collapsed into a chair and tried to light a cigarette. My hands were shaking. The whole thing was just a nightmare, and maybe I’d wake up in a minute.

Shandy had all the suitcases open and clothes scattered around on the floor. He grunted and came up with two big Manila envelopes. He took them over to the bed and emptied them. It was the money. There was a lot of it. “Let’s see that list, Jim,” he said.

The short cop passed it to him, and he sat down on the side of the bed with it. “If everybody was as sharp as that banker, we’d get these birds out of circulation,” he said, more to himself than to anyone else. “Hmmm. Here we are.” He lifted a bill out of the welter of currency and set it aside. There was terrible silence as he went on. “And here’s another one. Numbers match, all right.”

He looked across at Charlie and gave him that cold grin. “You should have stayed out of the sticks, Charlie, my boy. Looks like the wise guy slept in the hoosier’s barn.”

“I haven’t the slightest idea what you’re talking about,” Charlie said.

“They never do,” Shandy said. He turned to the other cop. “I better call in, Jim. Just keep ‘em happy, and don’t let ‘em sell you anything.”

He got up and walked over to the telephone on a table in the corner. He picked it up, with his back to us, and turned, watching over his shoulder. “Police Headquarters,” he said. “Boy, what a bunch of sad-looking wise guys!” Then he chuckled. “No, I wasn’t talking to you, Operator. Extension Two-seven, please.” He tapped a foot on the floor and whistled softly.

“Hello, Sarge? Say, if you’re interested in buying some stock in a sausage mine or a Pepsi-Cola well, I think we can fix it up for you…What? Yeah… Yeah. All four of ‘em. It’s Charlie, all right. And Ballantine. We even got the girl. She was asking for ‘em at the desk. Yeah, the same one the motel man in Wyecross described. Redhead. The Caddy was parked right out in front of the hotel.”

Well, if it meant anything now, I thought with weary bitterness, that explained how they’d got her. She’d come by for me, after all. Just about ten hours late—after the roof had fallen in.

This was the end of everything. They had us dead to rights. Goodwin could identify the three of us without any possibility of doubt, and they had the money with the serial numbers. We didn’t have a prayer. Cathy was the only one who might beat it, with a good lawyer—if she kept her mouth shut.

And what would be the use in trying to explain who Goodwin was and what he’d done? The fact that he’d broken the law in some banana republic sixteen years ago wasn’t going to cut any ice with a judge. It didn’t excuse our taking the law into our own hands. That’s fine, I thought bitterly. It’s nice to think about now.

I looked up. Shandy had finished with the telephone and was talking to the other cop. He nodded toward Bolton.

“This guy’s face is pretty banged up, Jim. Maybe you better take him on in so they can get a doctor or nurse to patch him up. I tell you. You take him and Prince Charlie and start booking ‘em. Sergeant’s sending over a couple of men, and they ought to be here by the time you get down front. One of ‘em can go back with you, and the other one can come up here and help me finish checking this money and gathering up their stuff, and then we can bring in the girl and this other guy. How’s that?”

“Oke,” Jim said. “You want me to put the cuffs on ‘em?”

Shandy shook his head. “Nah. These con men never get rough. Give the hotel a break. Looks like hell, guys going through the lobby in handcuffs.”

“Yeah,” Jim said. He jerked his head at Bolton and Charlie. “All right, boys. Let’s go.”

They went out. I lit another cigarette and walked over to the window to stare out because I couldn’t look at her. I just couldn’t. We’d been so near to making it. If it had broken the other way...

“Mike,” she said behind me.

“I’m sorry, Cathy,” I said. I didn’t look around. Early-morning sunlight was golden in the street. I saw the three of them come out onto the sidewalk below me. The other two policemen weren’t anywhere in sight yet. The cop called Jim said something to Charlie and Bolton, and they walked over to a black Ford sedan parked at the curb. Bolton got in front, and Charlie got in the back seat. The cop went around and got in behind the wheel. I saw the exhaust fog in the chill air as the motor started.

And then the cop got out again. He came around the rear of the car and up on the sidewalk, apparently looking for the men from Headquarters. He must be stupid, I thought. It had become strangely silent behind me in the room now, but I still didn’t look around. I was fascinated with the idea of his going off and leaving Bolton in the front seat of the car with the motor running. Then it happened so fast I could hardly follow it. There was a scream of rubber, and the Ford leaped ahead into the street. It must have been doing forty-five by the time it passed the corner. The short cop ran a few steps after it, waving his arms and yelling. He could have saved his breath.

I heard something behind me, and turned. Cathy was sitting on the bed with the pile of bills in her lap, laughing at me. The cop called Shandy was laughing too.

There had been too much. I couldn’t absorb any more. I just stared at them as she counted out some bills and handed them to him. “Here’s his, too,” she said. “Five hundred each. And you can keep the guns.”

I sat down weakly and watched them. It could have been a play I was seeing. I didn’t seem to have any connection with it yet.

He quit laughing and was looking at the money a little hungrily. “That’s a lot of dough, Red,” he said. “Mebbe we ought to have a bigger slice.”

She quit laughing too, and the brown eyes became very cold. “You know what you’ll get a bigger slice of if you try to squeeze me,” she said. “Impersonating an officer is a penitentiary offense.”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

“Wouldn’t I?”

He looked at her again, and must have seen the answer. “O.K., O.K. Don’t strip your gears. I’ll see you around.”

He was out the door by the time I'd digested what she had said about impersonating an officer. But he had called the station! I'd seen him and heard him. It hit me then. How stupid could you get? He'd had his back to us, and it was the simplest thing in the world to hold the other hand on the hook.

I was beginning to get up to date at last. Charlie and Bolton hadn't double-crossed me at all. She just hadn't come by to pick me up because she had other things to do. She couldn't be bothered. She was too busy cooking up this act to double-cross them and take all the money. I could get out from under any way I could. I thought of the whole night in that boxcar sick with worry over what had happened to her.

She smiled. "I'm sorry I had to scare you like that, Mike, but..."

I got up off the chair and walked over to her. The whole room was going around in a dark whirlpool of rage. I reached down a hand and caught the front of her fur coat and yanked her up. I pulled her toward me and she looked at my face and tried to cry out. I opened my mouth, but there were no words. I threw her back across the bed with money scattering everywhere, and went out and slammed the door.

Twenty minutes later I was on the bus, going west. I didn't feel anything at all, and I didn't think about anything. I didn't want to.

Nine

It was snowing when I got off the bus in Reno, dry powder swirling down out of the Sierra and softening the harsh blaze of neon along streets plowed out and drifted again. I left the bags in the station and walked over to Calhoun's, feeling the wind search through my clothes. In the late afternoon the place was jammed with the crowd that seems to go on forever, and full of the whirring clatter of slot machines and the click of chips and a dice man chanting: "Here we are, folks. Get 'em down. New gunner coming out."

Wally Manners was in his office. He's tough, but a good friend, and he was glad to see me now. After we'd shaken hands and I refused one of his cigars, he said, "I got your wire. You still want to go to work?"

"Yes," I said.

"All right. Start tomorrow, after you've had some sleep. You look pretty beat."

"Two days on the bus," I said.

"How you fixed for money?"

"I'm all right."

"Fine. I'll see you tomorrow, then. And Belen. Stay out of here on your time off."

"O.K.," I said.

"We're not interested in winning back your wages. And if you get a hot streak, get it somewhere else."

I thanked him and walked back to the bus station. After calling half a dozen rooming houses I finally found a place to stay and walked across town carrying the bags. It was a shabby, two-story mansion a little down on its luck. I paid a week's rent, and after the landlady had brought me up to date on all the other tenants I managed to get away from her long enough to locate the bathroom. I took a shower and scraped off three days' growth of

beard. The cut on my face where Bolton had hit me had healed pretty well, and most of the puffiness was gone from my hand.

It was a stage set for a boardinghouse room. I sat down on the slab of a bed and lit a cigarette and stared out the window. It was night now, but I could see snow eddying silently in the darkness beyond the glass and farther away the reflected neon bonfire of Virginia Street. I tried to remember if I'd eaten anything lately, but it didn't seem to make much difference. Nothing did. After a while I got into pajamas and turned out the light.

I'd been riding too long and the bed rocked the same way the bus had. I couldn't go to sleep. I was empty and washed out and beyond caring about anything, but I couldn't keep my eyes closed. They'd fly open and I'd be thinking about things, but the crazy part of it was that none of them seemed to make any difference. They didn't matter in the slightest. The police were looking for me. I was practically broke. I'd never find Lachlan now. Who cared? I was through with her at last, once and for all, wasn't I? After twenty-three years I'd got the last of her out of my system and she could go to hell, or Donnelly could use her for a clay pigeon, or she could find somebody else to double-cross.

So I'd been afraid Charlie would pull a fast one on her and take it all. I wanted to laugh, but there didn't seem to be any laughs in me either. I was going to protect her from Charlie, because Charlie was a crook. It was a shame about the laughs, because there might never be another masterpiece like that. It was a classic. Nobody would ever top it. Charlie, I suspect you of being dishonest, so unhand our little Nell. And tell her to give you back your arm.

I'll come by and pick you up at noon, dear, in my little Cadillac. But don't hold your breath.

I cursed and threw the blankets off and got up and dressed. The snow was slackening a little as I walked across town toward the lights. I remembered a little bar on a side street off Virginia and went in and sat down on a stool. A couple of shills nursed drinks at the blackjack table, the girl at the roulette wheel dribbled chips through her fingers, and a half-dozen people were shooting craps. Down at the other end of the bar four divorcees in slacks and fur coats were chattering over their drinks.

The barman remembered me, and nodded as he mopped the bar. “Haven’t seen you in a long time.”

“I’ve been away,” I said.

He studied me. “Let’s see. Bourbon, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah,” I said. “With plain water.” I always drank Scotch, but it wasn’t worth the effort.

He peered down the bar toward the covey of quail and shook his head. He hated women in bars. “One Planter’s Punch, one Golden Fizz, one Orange Blossom, and one Alexander. And you know what?”

“No,” I said. I knew what, because I’d heard it before, but maybe I’d get my drink sooner if I went along with him.

“Every damn one of ‘em will pay for her own drink. With a fifty-dollar bill.”

“It’s tough,” I said. I sat for a long time with the drink and then had another, but they seemed to have no effect on me at all. If anything, I felt worse. I got up and walked over to the table to watch the crapshooters. They were mostly women, making two or three passes in a row and betting fifty cents each time as if they were playing a slot machine. I waited until they came around to me, put five dollars on the line, and picked up the dice.

I had no business in a crap game now, and I knew it. I had about fifty dollars to eat on until payday, and I hadn’t even started to work yet. If you have to win, don’t gamble. That’s not a sermon; it’s a brutal piece of truth. It doesn’t mean you’re going to regret it if you lose; it simply means you probably will lose. Gamblers have another way of saying it, which implies the psychological basis: A scared buck never wins. They call luck a lady, and gamblers found out a long time ago that scared indecision gets you about as far with one as with the other.

I tried to tell myself now to stay out of it because I needed the money if I was going to eat. The only trouble was that I didn’t care whether I ate or not—or very much about anything else that I could think of. I shook the dice and threw.

They came up aces. Craps.

I put down another five dollars and bounced the dice against the end of the table. It was eleven this time. I let the ten lie on the line and rolled. I read four. Three rolls later two deuces came up and I shot the twenty. The stickman changed dice on me and I rolled two sevens in a row. I had eighty

dollars on the line, got six for a point, and made it on the next throw. I was warming up, but when the stickman shoved them back he shook his head.

"You'll have to pull down sixty," he said. "Hundred-dollar limit."

I handed the chips over. "Cash me in. I'll come back and match pennies with you some other time."

You can feel it when it's like that. I don't know how to explain it except that there's an uncanny certainty about the whole thing. You couldn't lose if you tried. I felt that way now as I walked up the street through the snow, but it meant nothing at all. It just didn't matter.

This was a gambling house instead of a bar, and there was a table with a limit you could work with. When the dice came around to me I dropped forty dollars on two straight craps and then started throwing passes. I banged into the limit on the sixth one, pulled part of it down, and then threw two more before I lost the dice. When they came around again I racked up five passes, bumping the limit every time, before I fell off.

It was crazy. It was the wildest, most erratic streak of luck I'd ever run into in my life. They changed the dice on me until they got tired of it. I made wild bets—the field, on elevens, hard-way sixes and eights, and nothing made any difference. I won just the same. The crowd started to gather. I cashed in, went outside, took a cab to shake them, and moved on to another place.

I lost a thousand dollars there before I made a point; then I got hot and ran out a string of nine consecutive passes. My clothes, even the coat pockets, were full of money because I kept cashing in and moving around. The crowds made me angry. The word had spread now, and there was no getting away from them. Sometime around midnight I hit a run of bad luck and started losing heavily. I cut down the bets and zigzagged up and down for hours before it started running my way again. And it didn't seem to matter whether I was winning or losing. I felt just the same. It was just something I was doing to pass the time because I couldn't sleep. I couldn't remember when I'd slept.

It must have been around five in the morning. I was no longer conscious of anything but a blur of faces ringing the deep-walled pit of the dice table and of the dice themselves rolling out, bouncing, and spinning, and then being raked back. My eyes hurt. There was a tense quiet except for the stickman singing the point. I was trying to make a nine, and had five

hundred dollars riding on it. Every number on the dice except nine and seven rolled up, over and over, until my arm grew numb. I wanted to take the dice and throw them against the wall or into the sea of blurred, white faces staring at me. I had just picked them up and straightened a little to ease the kink in my back when I saw her. Her face swam slowly into focus, straight across the table from me. I was going crazy. She couldn't possibly be here.

I shook the dice and threw them. They bounced, and one caromed off another cushion and came to rest six up. The other was spinning on one corner. I watched it. It stopped. It was the three.

I pushed in the chips. Everybody wanted to talk at once, and they all wanted to talk to me. I stuffed the money in my pockets and shoved impatiently through the crowd. I wanted to get outside in the air and just walk through the snow.

"Mike, please!" She had hold of my arm. I turned. I wasn't going crazy. The collar of the gray coat was turned up against her cheek and her eyes were very big and pleading. And they were very tired. She must have been driving all the time I was riding the bus.

"I've got to talk to you," she said.

"Sure," I said. "Pick me up sometime. Bring your knife."

I turned away. She held onto my arm. "Mike, will you listen?" she pleaded desperately.

People were beginning to stare at us. And you never knew what she might do next. She was just as likely as not to start screaming and accuse me of wife-beating or poisoning her mother.

"Come on," I said, "I'll buy you a drink. You can tell me your little story, and then you can beat it. Or I will."

We went over to the bar, but people were still following me. She looked helplessly around at the sea of faces and begged, "Mike, can't we get out of here? What I've got to tell you is very important."

"All right," I said. Anything to get it over with. I'd had enough for one lifetime. I could get used to being dead if she'd just quit digging up the corpse.

We went out into the street. The snow had stopped, and beyond the glare of neon you could see stars like a million pin points of frost. A car went

past with its tire chains slapping, and snow creaked under my shoes. She slowed. “The car is right here.”

We got in. There was just enough reflection from the neon signs for me to see her face very faintly. It was as lovely as ever, but it was awfully tired.

“All right, get with it,” I said. “It’s cold out here.”

“Couldn’t you do anything about that?” she asked quietly.

“No,” I said. “Let’s have the sob story.”

“You still think I double-crossed everybody, don’t you?”

“Why, of course not,” I said. “How could I ever think a thing like that?”

“Mike, darling,” she said almost tearfully, “haven’t you guessed yet what actually happened?”

“Sure. Everything just went black. And you only did it because you loved us.”

“Mike! Please stop it. And listen to me. Don’t you see yet? They double-crossed us. It was supposed to be Saturday.”

“What?” I swung around and caught her by the arm. “No. Don’t give me that. It was Friday. And you didn’t come, so if it hadn’t been for that freight train—”

“Mike, it was Saturday. Remember? Nine days after the beginning date of the option, which was Thursday.”

She was right. They’d moved it up a day, knowing that if she didn’t come by to pick me up they could ditch us both. I wanted to shout. I wanted to grab her and just yell. I wanted to—crawl under something out of sight, I thought.

“I’m sorry, Cathy,” I said. “I’m sorry as hell.”

“It’s all right, Mike. You don’t have to apologize.” She smiled a little. “But it’s still cold in here.”

We found that together we could do something about it. Those two awful days ganged up on me all at once and I held her very tightly, trying not to think about it.

After a while she stirred a little and we got back to what had happened.

“It wasn’t too hard to guess what they were up to,” she said. “When I came back from Houston I had an idea they were speeding things up a little. I called the hotel at Ludley Friday morning, and then called Houston. And when Charlie wasn’t at either place I knew our laughing boys had their shoes in their hands and were headed for the door. I tried to call you, but

you were out. It was too late by then to pick you up, of course, but with luck I might get them before they could get away from El Paso. Of course, I could have just gone to them and demanded our share, but since they wanted to play winner-take-all—" She smiled coldly. "Well, they asked for it," I said.

She turned to face me. "It's history now, Mike. We've got other things to think about."

She was always one jump ahead of me. "Such as?" I asked.

"Lachlan. The big one."

"Oh," I said. "But not right now."

"Why?"

"Right at the moment I'm too happy to hate even Lachlan. Wait here a minute." I got out of the car. In the bar that's never more than two doors from anywhere in Reno I bought a bottle of champagne and talked the barman out of two glasses. Somehow it seemed quite logical, just the thing you always did at six o'clock in the morning.

I slid in behind the wheel and drove, while she leaned against me with her head on my shoulder. We went out the Carson highway and turned off on the road to Mount Rose. It hadn't been plowed yet, but there were chains on the car and we made it as far as I wanted to go. It was a lookout point where you could pull off the road and look down across the valley. I got out and shoved the champagne and the two glasses into the waist-high barricade of snow left by the plows after an earlier snowfall.

When the champagne was cold it was growing light. I lifted her out of the car, because she couldn't walk in the snow in shoes that were only high heels and straps, and put her on the hood where she could see. It made her catch her breath. The valley was spread out below us, luminous and ghostly in the dawn, with nothing moving anywhere in all the white. I opened the champagne, the pop as the cork came out sounding strange and out of place in the frozen hush of early morning. We drank it all and then very gravely threw the glasses into the snowy pines below the road.

"Mike," she said suddenly, staring at me with a startled expression, "what makes your clothes so lumpy?"

"Oh." I'd forgotten all about the crap game. "Money."

She started laughing and slid down off the hood. I caught her and held her up. She was shrieking, and in a minute it struck me as funny and I

began, too. We leaned on each other and howled.

Donnelly was very far away then—Donnelly and Bolton and Charlie. And even Lachlan. But it didn't last long.

She said a strange thing as we got into the elevator to go up to the room I'd got at the hotel. I only half noticed it at the time, but I remembered it later. We were standing in the rear of the car, and I wasn't paying any attention to anyone except her.

"Darling," she asked quietly, "will there be another one at Hialeah?"

I turned and stared at her. "Another what?"

She looked confused and changed suddenly to Spanish. "I'm sorry," she said contritely. "I'm so sorry. I just forget."

We were on our way up to our room, and I didn't think any more about it then.

Who would?

Ten

We had fought a lot when we were married, and the thing we had fought about more than anything else was Lachlan. I could forget him once in a while, but she never could. She'd flare up and accuse me of being easy-going, lazy, and aimless. I wasn't dedicated.

I took the attitude that since we hadn't found him yet, there was no use staying in a perpetual uproar about him. He might even be dead, as far as we knew, and I didn't see any future in devoting our lives to anything as frustrating as trying to get even with a dead man. She couldn't see it that way, though. Weren't we still looking for him? We had to be ready to move in on him if we ever picked up his trail.

We watched the airline and steamship passenger lists in the New York, Miami, and New Orleans papers for all travel to and from Latin America. For a long time we had a detective agency working on it. We wrote endless letters to consuls in Central and South American cities. We picked up his trail in half a dozen cities, but it was always an old trail and he was gone. He'd disposed of his interest in the old firm of Dunbar & Belen long ago, and had moved out of the country when a new regime came into power. He'd been mixed up in oil in Venezuela, an airline in Colombia, and a land-development swindle of some kind in Panama. He made a lot of money, one way or another. But so far as we could learn, he still hadn't come back to the States.

All this effort had been to find Lachlan himself. We'd never bothered much with Goodwin; that is, until Cathy had heard of him from her friend Elaine Holman. She said she'd learned from a few things the Holman girl had let drop that her uncle, whose name was Goodwin, had spent some time in Central America during his younger days. This and the name had started her wondering, so she had made a trip to Wyecross to find out. This had still been a more or less side-line issue, however; Lachlan was always the one we were after.

But it hadn’t been the search that caused all the fights. The thing I could never go along with was her preoccupation with confidence games. She collected them. She studied them the way some people study chess, or Lee’s campaigns in the Civil War. She read everything she could find about them, and devised endless ones of her own, and always she’d lose patience with me because I couldn’t keep up any steady interest in them. It wasn’t surprising that she knew people like Charlie and Bolton, because bunco artists had always fascinated her. It was part of getting ready to cut Lachlan down, because we were going to find him someday, weren’t we?

And now we had. But I didn’t know the half of it yet.

It was early afternoon. I lay on the bed and watched her. She was sitting at the writing desk, dressed in a blue robe and mules, and the red hair was all in a jumble from running her hand through it. She was chewing a pencil and writing something.

“This would be a fine day to be married,” I said. “If you’d comb your hair.”

She frowned at the paper. “You can make an honest woman of me sometime when we’re not busy.”

“Are we busy?”

“Well, I am,” she said pointedly.

I lit a cigarette. “Well, let me know when you can work me into your schedule.”

“You’re already in it, amigo. Do you know how much money you won?”

“No,” I said.

“Guess.”

“Four pocketsful. Or is pocketfuls?”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, Mike, you’re hopeless. You won nine thousand, eight hundred and seventy dollars.”

“Well, it’s better than a kick in the backside with a frozen boot. What are you driving at? Besides going through my pockets while I’m asleep?”

“I’m adding up how much money we have altogether. With the sixty-five thousand—”

“You realize, of course,” I said, “that you’re going to get a bill from Charlie and Bolton for half of that, sooner or later.” I was still kidding on the outside, but I was serious.

She smiled, a little coldly. “I have no objection to their trying, I’m sure. If they didn’t learn last time—”

“Don’t worry,” I said. “They’ll try. Incidentally, do you suppose they’re wise to it yet?”

“Oh, certainly. They weren’t fooled for any longer than it took them to discover that wasn’t a police car. It was a U-Drive-It.”

I don’t know what made me think of it just then, but I suddenly remembered the strange thing she’d said in the elevator. I tried to remember it.

“Say, what was that crazy remark you made in the elevator?” I asked.

“When?”

“This morning. Something about Hialeah.”

“Oh.” She frowned and pushed her paper work aside and put a cigarette in her mouth. “That was it, darling. The opening gun of what we’ve waited sixteen years for.”

“I’m listening,” I said.

“Do you remember the man who was standing on your left? Big man with a deep tan?”

“Vaguely. Why?”

She struck a match and stared at me through cigarette smoke. “That,” she said, “was Martin Lachlan.”

“What!” I rolled over and sat up. I stared back at her.

“Mr. Martin Lachlan, swindler, oil man, playboy, big-game fisherman, lecher, and soon-to-be-sucker.”

“Wait a minute. You knew he was in Reno?”

“Yes. Certainly.”

“So that explains it. I see it now. I’ve been wondering how you knew I was here. You didn’t, did you? It was Lachlan that brought you.”

“Mike, stop yelling. I didn’t come here to see Lachlan. We’re going to see him in San Francisco. I came here because I had to find you. And the way I knew you were here is really quite simple. I couldn’t find you in Las Vegas. I knew you’d be in one or the other.”

I calmed down a little. “All right. But how did you find out he was here?”

“The detective agency. The one I’ve had working on it for the past year. I got a report from them just before I left San Antonio. Lachlan’s here

because he’s trying to reach a property settlement with his third wife. She’s staying at a dude ranch here, to divorce him.”

“But how’d you recognize him? You don’t remember what he looked like any more than I do.”

Without a word she opened her purse, which was lying on the desk. She took out something and sailed it across to me on the bed. I picked it up. It was a snapshot. “From the detective agency,” she said.

He was a powerfully built man who’d probably be in his late forties. It was a bold, self-assured face, and there was something about the way he held himself that gave you the idea he was one of those overbearing blowhards who’s always telling and showing you he’s just as good a man as he was twenty years ago. There wasn’t anything of the simpleton about him, though. The eyes told you better than that. They looked sharp and tough.

“A hard nut to crack,” I said, and sailed it back.

She smiled. “Not too hard.”

“He’s no fool. His record tells you that.”

“I know,” she said. “But that just makes it interesting.” Her eyes were shining. She was in love with the idea.

“All right,” I said. “But you still haven’t explained that screwball remark in the elevator.”

She smiled again. “It’s really quite simple, Mike. It was a plant.”

“A what?”

“Something that will stick in his mind. He heard it, because I saw him look around. It’ll puzzle him for a while, and then he’ll forget it. But the next time he sees us he’ll remember it. And he’ll be curious.”

“He won’t be half as curious as I am,” I said.

She got up and began pacing the floor. She ran her fingers through her hair. “It’s just what I’ve been telling you all these years, Mike, you Latin bird brain. We’ve found Lachlan, and you’ve got no plan of operation.”

“No,” I said. “But that’s what we’re going to do now. We’re going to figure one out.”

“It won’t be necessary, I assure you. I took care of that long ago. It’s all set. With just a little help from us, Mr. Lachlan is going to dig his own pit, walk into it, skin himself, and pass us the pelt. Now, do you want to know how it’s done?”

“How? What kind of flimflam is it?”

“The fixed race.”

“Cut it out, Cathy,” I said impatiently. “This is no time for joking.”

“I’m not joking. That’s the way we do it.”

“Don’t be a sap,” I said. “Didn’t you look at that picture? Don’t you remember his record? He’s no idiot. He’ll never go for anything as corny as that.”

She blew a smoke ring and looked at it. “You think not?” she asked smugly.

“Of course not. You tell any six-year-old kid you’re going to let him in on a fixed race and he’ll laugh in your face.”

“Yes. I know. That’s the reason I’m going to use it. I want to make it as humiliating as possible. I want to rub his face in it.”

“But it won’t work, I tell you,” I said angrily.

“Mike, you’re being a little naive. In the first place, you have no conception at all of the depths of human credulity. And in the second place, you don’t tell him you can fix a race. You convince him you can by telling him you can’t.”

“Now, that makes sense,” I said sarcastically.

“It makes a lot of sense when you understand what I mean.”

“If I ever do,” I said. “Suppose you go back to that crazy thing in the elevator and start filling me in from there.”

“All right,” she said. She sat down on the side of the bed. “To begin with, one of the angles of the thing is the fact that we both speak Spanish.”

“So does Lachlan.”

She smiled. “Exactly. If he didn’t, it would be utterly pointless. But he does, and he doesn’t have any idea at all that we know it. And when we meet again, if he’s curious about us, he’ll never let us know he does understand it, and that’s very important.

“Now, remember what I said. I mean, the way it would sound to somebody who understands both languages. I asked if there was going to be another ‘one’ at Hialeah. Hialeah, of course, is obviously a race track to anybody. And then, as I knew you would, you asked, ‘One what?’ Now, that could mean, of course, that you didn’t have any idea what I was talking about, but since there were other people present it could also mean, ‘Shut up, you damn fool.’ So I apologized, very contritely, in another language,

which I obviously hoped nobody listening would understand. You see how simple it is?”

“Yeah,” I said. “You sound like Charlie.”

“Oh,” she said, “all that’s elementary. The really dirty work is yet to come.”

“All right, all right,” I said. “But, Cathy, it looks to me as if we’re both off the track in one thing, right at the beginning. And that is, we’ve never thought of any reason why Lachlan should go for any kind of flimflam. They all work on the sucker’s desire to make a few fast bucks. And if Lachlan is already loaded, how can we interest him?”

“Because,” she explained patiently, “nobody has plenty of it, and nobody ever will. And on top of that he’s paying big chunks of alimony to two wives already, and number three is getting ready to push up to the trough. And don’t forget the little matter of income tax. Who couldn’t use a few hundred thousand that didn’t have to show up on March fifteenth?”

“O.K.,” I shrugged. “But I still say this race thing is crazy. So we go to him and whisper in his ear that we’ve got a sure thing in the second at Belmont Park. So then he calls the cops.”

“Dear old Mike,” she said exasperatedly. “We don’t whisper anything in his ear, now or ever. We try our best to avoid him. We don’t know anything about races, fixed or otherwise. And when he comes around pestering you about it, you assure him, quite honestly, that to the best of your knowledge there is no such thing as a fixed race.”

“I don’t believe it.”

“You will,” she said.

Eleven

If the world had lost a great actor when Charlie became a crook, it lost a brilliant general when Cathy was born a girl. The next week was one of the busiest I'd ever put in in my life. When you looked at the thing at close range and out of context, it didn't make, much sense; all we seemed to be doing was spending money in one mad shopping spree. But when you saw it in perspective and as part of the whole plan, it was all as carefully thought out as the Normandy invasion. We drove to San Francisco and registered at the St. Francis as Dr. and Mrs. Michael Rogers.

I went to a tailor and ordered five new suits and assorted tweed sports coats and slacks and went to a shirtmaker for a couple of dozen new shirts. She began looting the San Francisco shops. She'd always had wonderful taste in clothes, and for once in her life she didn't seem to care in the slightest what anything cost, so before long she began to stand out as a clothes horse, even in San Francisco. I'd meet her to take her to lunch and when I'd see her coming along the street in the spring sunshine she looked like an angel with charge accounts.

"Could I buy you this flower stand?" I asked.

"Silly, why?"

"We could throw flowers in front of the cable cars."

"You're nice, Mike, but impractical."

"What do we have to do now?"

"The Rotunda of the City of Paris. We're still looking for pictures for the apartment. Remember?"

"We haven't got an apartment. Remember?"

"We will have."

And we did. We got just the one we wanted in the Montlake, the big apartment hotel where Lachlan lived. It was six rooms besides the servants' quarters, with a view of the bay all the way from the Golden Gate to

Alcatraz and a doorman who looked a little like Admiral Drake except that he dressed better. When I learned the rent I managed to keep from wincing.

"We'll be ready to move in in a day or two, Mike," she said excitedly that night in the room at the St. Francis. We had gone up to get cleaned up for dinner. A boy had brought up a bottle of Scotch and some ice, and I fixed us a drink. She had on a new robe about the color of moonlit fog and probably less than half as dense. She was something to see.

"You're something to see," I said.

"So I noticed, you Latin goat. Just hold some ice cubes on your wrist for a moment, or think of me as your ex-wife. We have to talk business."

"What now?"

"How would you like a Jaguar?"

"No, thank you," I said. "I used to be married to one."

"Idiot! I mean the car."

"Why?" I asked. "Are you turning in the Cadillac?"

"No. The Jaguar is for you."

"That's fine," I said. "That's just what we need. Two cars, I mean. Nobody's found space enough to park one around here since the Coolidge administration, so now we're going to circle the block with two."

She lit a cigarette and sat down in a big chair. "We need it," she informed me. "It's more window dressing."

"That brings up a point," I said. "Aren't we overdoing it a little?"

"No," she said definitely. "Not for Lachlan. He's the type of nouveau riche who thinks money's for show. You have to club people with it if you have it. I know all this is a little thick, but subtlety'd be lost on him."

I shrugged. "Maybe you're right. But if Lachlan doesn't go for it, it'll be an expensive horse laugh."

"Don't worry," she said calmly. "He'll bite."

It was one of the primary booby traps in her campaign. She'd explained it to me that day in Reno, in pointing out why we'd had to have so much money to tackle it. I didn't understand at first.

"It doesn't match up," I said. "Michael Rogers is a veterinarian. Well—I mean, they probably do all right, and maybe they even eat steak twice a week, but I never heard of one who had a private pipeline into Fort Knox."

"Well?" She smiled.

"Oh!" I said.

“You see? There it is. What would be your idea if you were a bank president and noticed one of your seventy-a-week bookkeepers or tellers was coming to work in a Mercedes-Benz and buying his wife a new mink every year?”

“I’d call the auditors. Or grab my piggie bank and scram before he got that too.”

“In other words, you might have a faint suspicion that he had some other source of income?”

“All right,” I said. “You don’t have to draw me a picture.”

* * *

It was fine that week—most of the time. I noticed, though, that the moments when she could relax and laugh or even pay much attention to my telling her how lovely she was were becoming more and more rare. She was completely absorbed in this Lachlan thing. It was becoming an obsession with her. We had to rehearse it by the hour. When we weren’t talking about it, she was thinking about it, going through each of the moves in her mind.

And I began to catch myself thinking about Goodwin more than I had. I’d quit worrying so much about the police as time went by and we still seemed safe enough half a continent away, but I had a habit of suddenly—and for no reason at all—-remembering Goodwin himself or his wife and their house in Wyecross. I wondered how he had raised the $65,000, whether it had taken everything he had. And then I’d curse myself. What did I care how he raised it? How much did I suppose he’d worried when he’d helped Lachlan ruin the rest of us?

And there was one other thing. I awoke one night to find her pounding on my chest and crying out that I was breaking her in pieces.

“Mike! What on earth are you trying to do?” she panted.

I was sweating. My pajama top was wet and my hands were shaking. I had to switch on the light and look at her to reassure myself. “It was just a dream,” I said. “A bad dream.”

“For heaven’s sake, what did you dream about? Dinosaurs?”

“Donnelly.”

“Oh, will you ever forget Donnelly?”

“No,” I said. “And I just thought of something.”

“What?”

“I shipped him out here. Remember?”

We moved into the Montlake the next day, and it must have looked like an Indian prince taking off for his summer palace. There were sixteen pieces of luggage, I think, besides all the packages and hatboxes and a fur coat or two.

The apartment was on the ninth floor. I stood by the big windows in the living room and looked out over the bay. It was sparkling and clear in the morning sunshine, and I could see a boat going out to Alcatraz. They’ve got a view over there too, I thought, but they don’t like it. A whole rock covered with tough guys and wisenheimers who knew more than the cops. And just beyond, out of sight up the bay, was San Quentin, where the state of California kept its smart characters who could never be caught. I remembered that awful minute in the hotel room in El Paso when I’d opened the door and seen her standing there with the two men in white Texas-sheriff hats. How many warnings did I need?

I shrugged it off, a little angrily. I was getting as nervous as an old woman. Either we wanted Lachlan or we didn’t. And if we did, I couldn’t spend all my time standing around shaking like a chicken. He’d taken his chances, and if we wanted a rematch we had to be as tough as he was.

We bought the Jaguar that morning and drove it over on Fillmore to try it out on a hill. After that we rolled it down Bayshore to San Mateo, went over to Skyline, and came back to the beach and to the Cliff House for lunch. For a while we were like a couple of high-school kids with a new hot rod. We had a bottle of wine with the abalone and we laughed a lot and were very happy, watching the seals out in the kelp beds and the big ground swells heaving up to batter at the rocks. When we came back to the apartment there was a Chrysler station wagon with a lot of dust on it pulled into the loading zone ahead of us and the doorman and two bellboys were unloading luggage and an armful of heavy boat rods and salt-water reels like drums. The big bareheaded man in the suede jacket was wearing sunglasses, but I saw him turn and do a double take at her as we went past, and I knew we were closing in on him at last. It was Lachlan.

* * *

I got up early the next morning and made a trip down to the Skid Row south of Market. To put on this act of ours we had to have the help of one other person—just a brief appearance in the early stages—and he had to speak Spanish. She even had that all figured out. It had to be somebody with enough intelligence to swing his part and still not a wise guy who'd ask too many questions or want to muscle in himself.

And we had to be sure he'd disappear when his job was done. There was an answer to that, which I thought of almost as soon as she did: a wetback.

I took the cable car down to the foot of Powell and walked on over to Howard. It was another beautiful morning, even here among the flophouses and cheap taverns and hole-in-the-wall cafes smelling of grease and chile. A wino slept with his head against a fire hydrant with an empty bottle in the gutter beside him, and somebody had stolen his shoes. There were half a dozen employment agencies along here with big blackboards on the walls and men standing around listlessly as if they had even forgotten what they were waiting for. I tried the first one and didn't see anyone who looked promising. In the next one my luck was better. He was a young Mexican in clean khakis and a leather coat.

I went over to him. "Good morning. Looking for a job?"

He nodded, a little warily. The jobs came off the board he was watching, not from strangers wandering in off the street.

"You speak English?" I asked.

He nodded again. "I was born in San Antonio. I speak much English."

"That's fine," I said. "I was in San Antonio myself, during the war. Stationed at Fort Lewis. You know where that is?"

"Oh, sure. I live near to it. I worked there."

He looked pretty good and as if he might do. He was a good liar, and a wetback, and that's what we wanted. "It's all right," I said in Spanish, and grinned at him. "I don't care what part of Mexico you're from. I'm not an Immigration man." He was fast on the uptake, all right, for it took him only a second to see he'd gone into the bucket on that Fort Lewis thing. Lewis is in Washington.

"How are you called?" I asked.

"Juan Benavides."

He probably wasn't, but it didn't make any difference. "I'm glad to know you, Juan," I said. "My name's Rogers. Let's go get a cup of coffee.

Perhaps I have a job for you."

We went over to Mission and found a restaurant a little cleaner than most. He was broke, so I ordered him some ham and eggs while I got coffee. While he was eating, I gave him the proposition.

"I'll give you an outfit of clothes, two hundred dollars American money, and a bus ticket to anywhere you want to go. The job won't take more than a half hour, with maybe two or three hours' coaching, but you may have to wait around a week or ten days till I get ready for you. Naturally, I'll pay for your room and meals while you're waiting. How about it?"

He stopped his assault on the ham and eggs for a moment to study me with grave Latin suspicion. "What class of job is this?"

"It's just a little joke I want to play on a friend of mine. I need somebody who speaks Spanish. Very good Spanish, too, not like just any peon."

"A serious joke?"

"No," I said. "Not serious."

"Maybe there will be trouble with the police?" He was a little suspicious of that "joke on a friend" angle, as I knew he would be if he was smart enough to be of any use to us. However, I had a pretty good idea as to what form his reluctance would take.

"No," I said. "This is not a joke that would interest the police."

"Nevertheless," he said, "I could not do a job of this class for less than three hundred dollars. As you can see, it would take great skill."

He'll do, I thought. He doesn't even know what the job is, and already it takes great skill and three hundred dollars. Maybe we should take him in as a partner.

"Two-fifty," I said.

"Two hundred and seventy-five, and a gold watch chain with the suit."

"Two hundred and sixty and a gold watch chain," I said. There really wasn't any sense to it, but you can never afford to lose face in one of those transactions by giving in on the first round. It isn't actually the money so much as a matter of personal honor.

"I accept your job," he said.

I took him over to a men's furnishing store on Market and let him pick out the whole outfit from the shoes up. He settled for a sort of semizoot affair in something that looked electric blue in the store and would probably be worse in daylight, and got a high-crowned snap-brim hat to go with it. It

was about what I'd had in mind, and it all fitted the picture very well. He had to look sharp. I paid for it and gave him the alteration slip for the suit and the Montlake address and apartment number.

"The clerk says it'll be ready day after tomorrow," I said. "As soon as you get it, come on up to this address and see me. Here's twenty dollars. Get yourself a room, and when you come up, be sure to bring me the hotel telephone number, or at least the name, so I can look it up. You understand all that?"

"I understand. Do you remember the gold watch chain?"

"It will be there."

We went out and shook hands on the sidewalk. "Until later," I said. "Until later."

I watched him take off across the street. Of course he could always pick up his new clothes and lam, with all of it clear profit, but I didn't think he would. He'd probably show up.

I walked back to Powell. The usual crowd of tourists blocked traffic around the cable-car turntable, but I managed to climb, onto the step as the car started clanging up the hill with people hanging on everywhere, like a subway car turned wrong side out. We only have two cars now, I thought; I have to do this. The trouble was I was just as big a sucker for the cable cars as the other tourists.

When we made the stop at Sutter some more people piled on till we looked like a bunch of grapes being dragged up a hill. Some tall guy made a landing on the step beside me and I tried to crowd over enough to give him something to hang onto. His arm was across in front of my face and our feet were so mixed up I didn't know whether I was standing on mine or his.

"A little crowded, eh, Belen?" a voice said in my ear. I turned, and Judd Bolton and I were rubbing noses like two Eskimos. Our arms were across each other's necks as we held onto the stanchions.

We stared at each other for a full ten seconds. There didn't seem to be anything to say.

"Do you rumba?" I asked.

Twelve

“Yes,” he said. “But I sing better. Or maybe you’d rather have a little talk first.”

The car stopped in the middle of California Street and he stepped down and nodded at me. I got down and we both walked over to the sidewalk. I still hadn’t thought of anything. I’d know all the time this was going to happen, but maybe I just hadn’t expected it so soon.

“How about the Top of the Mark?” he asked.

“All right.”

It wasn’t crowded, and we got seats by a window with empty booths on both sides of us. We ordered Scotch, and while we were waiting for the drinks I studied his face. The cuts were healed now. You couldn’t see anything in the eyes; they were as noncommittal and hard and gray as ever. He was smooth and tough as they come, but somehow in a civilized sort of way—which made it worse, because there was no way on earth to guess what he was capable of.

Suddenly I was conscious of an odd sort of flashback to that night in the bar in New Orleans and the way he had cringed before Donnelly. It still puzzled me. The evidence didn’t add up right.

The drinks came. “Salud,” I said. And then, as soon as the waiter was gone, I went on quickly, trying to beat him to the punch. “Well, don’t keep me guessing all day. I want to hear about it. How’d you get away? And what about Charlie? Did he—”

“Cut it out, Belen,” he interrupted impatiently. “Let’s dispense with the fairy tales and get down to business. Where’s Cathy?”

I could see that routine was out. As she’d said, they’d known they were sold as soon as they took a look at the car. I had to try something else.

“Cathy?” I asked in surprise. “How would I know?”

“Oh, I see. She’s not with you?” he murmured politely.

“No,” I said. “I went off and left her in El Paso. She’s lucky I didn’t strangle her. Leaving me there in Wyecross to get away the best way I could.”

“Two down,” he said boredly. “Now, if you’re sure you’re finished with that one, we’ll get on with it. You left Reno together just a week ago, if that’s any help to you, so where is she?”

He had me. He knew all the answers. I lit a cigarette to stall for time. “You don’t think I’m going to tell you, do you?”

“I don’t know for sure, but I think so. As a matter of fact, you probably won’t have to. If you’ll just tell her you saw me and give her a message, she’ll probably call me.”

“She won’t,” I said. “But let’s have the message.”

“Tell her if I don’t get my share of that money, I’m going to call Lachlan.”

He had us. He had us right over the barrel. One word to Lachlan and the whole thing would blow up and drift away in a cloud of smoke before it even got started. I sat there looking at the wreckage of all our plans with a sort of numb helplessness, and it was a long minute before the full implication of it hit me.

“What do you mean, Lachlan?” I snapped. “What do you know about him?”

“Why, practically all there is to know,” he said calmly. “After all, she and I were planning the deal together until she picked you up in New Orleans.”

I felt the anger burning inside me. So nobody knew about it except us! Lachlan was ours.

“And just in case you think I don’t know where he is now,” Bolton went on smugly, “I’ll dispel that little illusion. He’s back at his apartment in the Montlake. He came in yesterday.”

“All right,” I said helplessly. “I’ll tell her.”

I’d tell her plenty, I thought.

“Just ask her to call me at the Sir Francis Drake.”

“And you think she’s going to split that money with you? After the way you and Charlie double-crossed us?”

It didn’t bother him at all. “That was Charlie’s idea,” he said with urbane composure. “And as far as splitting the money’s concerned, I don’t see that

she has much choice in the matter." He smiled. "Do you?"

I didn't. There was no use arguing about it. He held the cards. I wondered what she'd do. Nobody could make her give up that much money, and nobody could make her give up Lachlan. It was a variation of the irresistible force and the immovable object. Either way it was unthinkable. I looked out across the Bay Bridge with its cables shining in the sun. There was no use searching for a way out. There wasn't any. Suddenly I thought of something else, a question I'd never been able to get her to answer.

"By the way," I said, "since you seem to know everything, there's something I wish you'd clear up for me. Who is Donnelly?"

He glanced at me, slightly puzzled. "Don't you know?"

"Of course not. I wouldn't ask if I did."

"He's a hophead, for one thing. Used to peddle the stuff, till he got to using it himself, or maybe it's the other way around. Kind of a handyman for a gang around Chicago, and later in New York."

"How bad is he?"

He shook his head slightly. "It's always hard to say. You have to know how much of the stuff he has in him at the time, and a number of other variable factors. Unloaded, so to speak, and without a gun, he's about as harmful as the Easter bunny. He may be a little cracked at times, I think, and seems to hate women. Probably his hormones are out of kilter. I don't know. All you have to do is guess all these factors at any precise moment."

I felt a little sick. "But where does he get this dream that Cathy owes him some money? Out of the pipe?"

Bolton picked up the glass and looked at it, frowning a little. "No, I don't think so. I don't know for sure, of course, but it looks to me as if for the first time in his life he might be on the right side of something. It all depends on the way you look at the ethics of gambling debts."

"How's that?"

"Well, legally, they have no status, of course. Gamblers, I understand, look at the matter differently."

"They do," I said curtly. "But get to the point."

"All right. It's a simple thing. You knew Lane was a bookie, I guess, and that he was killed by a holdup man? Well, the day he was killed he accepted a bet from Donnelly for four hundred dollars on some horse named—I don't

remember now. Silver Stream or Slip Stream or something like that. Donnelly's a terrific plunger and all the money he doesn't spend for dope goes to the ponies. But once in a while he gets hold of a good tip and makes a killing. This horse was one of them. He was a long shot, and maybe Lane took it and laid it off somewhere and maybe he didn't. Nobody knows, because that night Lane was killed right in front of his house in Connecticut as he and Cathy were getting out of the car. The horse had come in and paid a little better than twenty to one. She says Lane didn't accept any such bet as that. Donnelly says he did. Take your choice."

"Do you think Donnelly had anything to do with killing him?"

Bolton shook his head. "No. They caught the man who did it. Donnelly couldn't have had anything to do with it, anyway. He was in jail."

"In jail? Well, how'd he make the bet?"

"Earlier. The police picked him up on suspicion of something around noon that day, and it was several weeks before he was in circulation again. And that's the reason he didn't have the betting slip to back up his claim. He says the police lost it when they took all his stuff away from him at the jail."

"It sounds fishy to me," I said.

He shrugged. "As I say, I wouldn't know. The only thing I'm sure of is that I'm glad it's not me he's after."

I felt a little cold, thinking about it. "So Donnelly wants eight thousand. And how much is it you're after?"

"Thirty-two thousand, five hundred. I'm presenting Charlie's bill, too."

I stood up. "I wish you both luck," I said. "You'll need it."

"You think so?" He smiled coolly. "Just give her my message."

I went off and left him sitting there. Everything was ruined. And on top of that, she had lied to me. I was burning with anger as I stalked over to the Montlake.

She wasn't in the apartment. I waited, walking up and down the living room, smoking one cigarette after another. I don't know how long it was. It was the sound of bumpers clashing that finally took me to the window. I looked down and I could see her. She was trying to park the Cadillac. If it had been anyone else I'd have said she was drunk, but I knew she couldn't be because she never drank that much. She was trying to put the car in a parking space at least two cars long and she was as clumsy at it as a

rhinoceros in a tearoom. She would bang into the car in front and then go slamming back to crash into the one behind, and she never did get close to the curb. I watched her coldly, wondering what it was this time. She could put that Cadillac anywhere a parking-lot attendant could, and in half the time.

Then I saw what it was. Another car had apparently just pulled up a minute or two before, nearly up at the end of the block. It was a foreign car of some kind, and I could see the man getting out. Even nine floors up I recognized the Texas hat and the arrogant walk. It was Lachlan. He looked toward the bumper-crashing and walked back to her instead of going in the doorway. I could see them talking, and then she slid over in the seat while he walked around and got in behind the wheel. He eased it into the parking place and they both got out. They were directly below me and I could see the white blur of her face, tipped up a little, thanking him and smiling. Then they came on inside the doorway.

In a few minutes I heard her key in the apartment door. I sat down on the arm of a big chair. She came in smiling, her eyes shining with excitement, and ran over to kiss me.

“Mike, darling. I was hoping you’d be back. I did it.”

I said nothing.

She went on, babbling with amusement. “It was easy. Just a slight variation on an old theme.” She began to notice something was wrong. She looked at me questioningly. “Darling, what’s the matter?”

I reached out and caught her arm and pulled her toward me. “Nobody knows about Lachlan except us,” I said roughly. “He’s ours, our own private project.”

“Darling,” she protested, “of course nobody knows.” She took another look at my face then, and I didn’t have to spell it out for her.

“So Bolton is in town?”

“Why’d you lie to me?”

I let her hand go and she sat down, looking at the floor. At last she glanced pleadingly up at me. “Please try to understand, Mike. Don’t you see? I’d found Lachlan at last, after all those years. And I didn’t even know where to start looking for you, to help me. I had to have somebody, because I couldn’t do it alone, so I got Bolton.”

What difference did it make? I thought wearily. The whole thing was washed up anyway. “Well, for your information,” I said, “you’ve got Bolton. Right around your neck. Unless you want to hand him thirty-two thousand dollars.”

“What!”

“He says if you don’t call him, he’s going to call Lachlan and tip him off.”

She raised her head and stared at me. “Oh, he is?” she asked. She was getting that thoughtful look in her eyes again. “And just where is Mr. Bolton?”

“At the Sir Francis Drake.”

“And he wants me to call him? Well, isn’t that nice?” She stood up.

“What are you going to do?” I asked.

She smiled. “Why, I’m going to call him, Mike. That’s what he wanted.”

I just sat there and watched her. She picked up the telephone and asked for the hotel.

“Mr. Bolton,” she said sweetly. “Mr. Judd Bolton. Would you ring him, please?” Then she looked at me, completely deadpan, and winked.

“Hello, Judd. How are you? This is Cathy,” she said. What now? I thought. It was old college chum greeting old college chum after an absence of five years. “Mike just now told me you were in town and said you wanted to see me. Of course, dear. Come on over. Dr. and Mrs. Rogers. We’re in Nine-A at the Montlake. Hurry over and we’ll pour you a drink.”

After she had hung up she called the desk and asked the clerk to send a boy up with some Western Union blanks. When they came she sat down at the coffee table and wrote out three or four telegrams. I merely shook the ice in my drink and waited. There was no use even trying to guess what was going to happen.

He came up about twenty minutes later. I let him in, we nodded coolly to each other, and I went out in the kitchen to fix him a drink. When I came back Cathy was still sitting at the coffee table with her telegrams and he was smoking a cigarette and smiling complacently from a big chair across from her.

“Lovely place you have here,” he said. “Nice view.”

“Yes, isn’t it?”

“Nice of you to ask me over.”

“Not at all,” she said sweetly. “We’re just sorry we didn’t know sooner you were in town. I understand you were thinking of trying to get in touch with us through Mr. Lachlan.”

I sat down at the other end of the sofa, stretched out my legs, and watched them. Bolton held all the cards. You could see that in the complacent and almost patronizing way he was beginning to put the pressure on. He had us, and he knew it. He’d sweat us for a few minutes first, though, just for laughs.

“Oh, I didn’t really think that would be necessary,” he said smoothly. “I was sure you’d agree to my proposition as soon as you had a chance to examine it.”

“Why, certainly, Judd,” she said. “But how can I agree to it if I don’t know what it is?”

“Well, I’ve been thinking about it.” He gazed thoughtfully at the end of his cigarette like a banker getting ready to grant a two-million-dollar loan. “It would be a shame to give up this Lachlan deal, now that you’ve got so much invested in it. So why don’t we work out a deal along these lines? You turn over the thirty-two thousand, five hundred you owe me and Charlie, and then cut me in for half of this Lachlan negotiation.”

I whistled softly. There was nothing bashful about Bolton when he started tightening the screws.

“Oh, I meant to ask you,” she said smoothly, “do you know where Charlie is?”

He shook his head and smiled. “In the East somewhere, I believe. I’m not sure.”

“Well, if you’re collecting for him, how do you expect to deliver the money if you don’t know his address?”

He smiled again. “That does raise an interesting question, doesn’t it? But we needn’t go into that. I’ll be glad to accept full responsibility for delivering it, and relieve you of the worry. I know it’s been bothering you.”

“That’s very nice of you, Judd. But what if we can’t agree to your terms?”

“Oh,” he said easily, “I think you can come around to my way of thinking. Life is essentially a series of compromises.”

“But just supposing, for the sake of argument, that we didn’t?”

“In that case, I’d have to call Lachlan.”

“Would you, really?”

“Certainly.”

She smiled. “I like your frankness. I’ll be equally open with you. The telephone is right over there by the door.”

I couldn’t see what she was driving at. Neither could Bolton. He studied her face, trying to figure it out.

“You mean that?” he asked.

“Why, surely. And I’ll even let you use it, first,” she said. “I’ll send my telegrams after you’re finished talking to Mr. Lachlan.”

“Telegrams?” he asked. I hadn’t got anything yet, but maybe he could hear the bomb beginning to tick.

“Yes. Oh, I didn’t show them to you, did I? I wrote them out while we were waiting for you. Here.” She shoved them across the table, all except one. “The first one is to the chief of police in Denver. And the other is to the bunco squad in Miami. They’re still anxious to contact a Major Jarvis Ballantine, I understand. And, of course, as far as the police here in San Francisco are concerned, I could just call them on the telephone and suggest they check with Denver and Miami and that they might find you at the Sir Francis Drake or the airport.”

He was the one who was sweating now. You could see it working on him. “You don’t mean that,” he said.

“I’ll tell you an excellent way to find out. Call Mr. Lachlan and see.”

“You couldn’t.” He was blustering a little.

“I’ve already suggested a way you can test it. You won’t know for sure until you do. You say life is a series of compromises; in a way, it’s also a series of uncertainties.”

“Yes, but there’s one thing you’ve forgotten,” he said. “And that is that I could call the police in Wyecross and tell them where you are.”

“But, why, Judd, for heaven’s sake?” she asked innocently. “Or have you forgotten something? I didn’t have anything at all to do with that, but you did.”

She had him there, in this colossal game of bluff. There was no way Goodwin or the police could ever pin any of it on her. All she had was the money.

He ground out the cigarette in a tray and got up. His face was dark with anger.

“You’re not going, Judd?” she asked. “Why, you haven’t even finished your drink.”

“What’s in it?” he asked harshly. “Arsenic, or cyanide?” He stopped at the door and looked back, and I could see him beginning to get hold of an idea. Some of his assurance returned.

“You won’t get away with it,” he said, grinning coldly. “You really overlooked something, Cathy.”

“And what is that?”

“I might—I say, I just might call Lachlan tomorrow or next week or ten days from now from Seattle or Los Angeles or Jersey City. And you wouldn’t know it. Maybe you didn’t think of that. There’s an interesting little uncertainty for you. How would you like working on a mark who’s been wised up and has the bunco squad sitting on the side lines waiting for you to make your pitch?”

I hadn’t thought of that, and now that I got a look at all the deadly beauty of it I could feel the butterflies in my stomach. Wouldn’t that be a setup? We’d never know whether Lachlan had been tipped off or not until the actual moment they closed in on us. It would be like trying to disassemble an unfamiliar land mine in the dark; the only way you’d know when you had the trigger was when it went off. She couldn’t have any answer for that one. Or did she? I looked at her and she was smiling again.

“Oh, how stupid of me,” she said. “I knew I had forgotten something. I didn’t show you the other telegram.”

“The other one?”

“Why, yes. This one.” She held it out, but he made no move to take it. “It’s to the Chicago police. Just a little tip that they might get in touch with you by contacting your mother out in Oak Park. Think what a revelation that’ll be. To both the police and your mother. Can’t you just see the headlines? ‘Son of Prominent Committeewoman Sought.’”

I watched his face. It was the first time I’d ever been able to see very far into Bolton, and now that I did I didn’t find it a very comforting sight. He looked at both of us with his hand on the door and said, “That’s one I’d advise you not to send, Cathy.”

That was all. He went out and closed the door.

Thirteen

He’d called it an interesting uncertainty, and that was probably the understatement of the year. Would he, or wouldn’t he? It could drive you crazy. Who had outbluffed whom?

Fortunately, I didn’t have time to stew about it that night. I met Lachlan, at last.

We were going out to dinner and stopped in the cocktail lounge in the building. It was the usual chi-chi sort of place, with white leather upholstery in the booths, a girl playing a Hammond organ, and just enough light to grope your way around. The place was almost empty. We had just sat down at a booth and ordered our drinks when I saw him come in. He didn’t notice us at first, and sat down at the bar. When his drink came he looked up and saw her in the mirror.

He didn’t know me, and she hadn’t asked him. He came over anyway, with his drink in his hand. “Hello, there,” he said.

It was just the sort of break we’d been hoping for, but it still got under my skin. She looked up, pretending she had just noticed him, and smiled. “Why, hello. It’s Mr.—ah—”

“Lachlan, folks,” he said heartily. “Remember? The parking-lot attendant.”

She made the introduction. “This is my husband, Dr. Rogers. Darling, Mr. Lachlan. The man who helped me park the car.”

I stood up and we shook hands. “Join us?” I asked, with as little invitation as I could get into it. I was supposed to play it very cold and close-mouthed, the way we had it worked out, but it wasn’t any act.

He jerked his head for the waiter to bring a chair, and sat down at the end of the table. We’d hardly touched our drinks, but he insisted on ordering two more.

“Doctor?” he asked. “Are you an M.D.?”

I shook my head curtly. “Veterinarian.”

He dismissed that with a grunt. “Oh?” he said, and turned to Cathy. “You know, Mrs. Rogers, I could swear I’ve seen you somewhere before. You’re not in the movies, are you?”

It was pretty crude, especially from a middle-aged goat who was old enough to be her father. I had a pleasant moment thinking of how, normally, she’d let the air out of any oaf who’d pull something like that, but now she took a bow on it, looking flattered and a little overcome, like a girl at her first prom. “No,” she said, shaking her head and smiling. “I’ve never been any nearer Hollywood than right here.”

“Well, that’s a shame,” he boomed. He turned and included me in the conversation again. “Doctor, I notice you drive a Jaguar. How do you like it?”

“Pretty well,” I said. “I haven’t had a chance to race it yet.”

“They’re not bad. I had one for a while, but I got rid of it and picked up that Italian job I’ve got now. There’s a car. Of course,” he added, with an offhand wave of the paw, “it costs a lot more.” He was one of those people who manage to rub their money in your face like grating a nutmeg.

“By the way,” he went on, “Mrs. Rogers said you lived a long time in Peru. You ever do any fishing around Cape Blanco?”

This was one of the ticklish parts of it. Cathy’d been to Peru with her mother one year, but I’d never been there. We were pretty sure he hadn’t either, but weren’t absolutely certain of it.

I shook my head. “No. I was mostly up in the mountains. Little trout fishing was all.”

“Oh, trout.” He consigned trout fishing to the category of sissy pastimes like making your own clothes or painting teacups. “I was hoping you might have tried it. Never been there myself. The usual places, Bimini, Acapulco, and so on, but somehow I always missed Blanco.”

“Oh?” I said.

He brought us up to date on what kind of physical condition you had to be in to fight martin, and asked us to guess his age. We both knew he was either forty-eight or forty-nine, so I said forty-one and Cathy said forty. He told us he’d played football in college, and that he could go out there right now and run through a scrimmage without raising a sweat. He knew several movie stars. He kept a forty-foot cruiser at San Diego. But I kept noticing he never mentioned Central America. That was good.

Most of this was directed at Cathy, but occasionally he would remember I was there too and make an effort to work me into the conversation. “What kind of work do you do mostly, Doc?” he asked. “Horses? Dogs? That sort of thing?”

“I’m not doing any at all at the moment,” I said.

Cathy took it off the backboard. “Dr. Rogers hasn’t practiced for several years, though he used to work mostly with race horses. Lately, he’s become interested in research.”

“For the government?”

She shook her head. “Just for himself. You see, his father was a medical missionary in the Andes and as a child he became interested in the Indians and—”

I shot her a dirty look, trying not to make it too obvious, and she let it trail off rather lamely into something vague about high altitude and diet. While she was still floundering around with it, I glanced at my watch and said curtly we had to start to dinner. The whole thing was brusque to the point of rudeness. I shook hands rather coldly with Lachlan as we stood up, thanked him for the drink, and said with no sincerity at all that I hoped we would see him again. As we were leaving and were almost, but not quite, out of earshot, I snapped at her in Spanish, “Long tongue!”

* * *

That night after dinner we worked on the plan some more. We had an argument to begin with, but she finally won me over. I said her whole idea was too subtle for a meat-headed egotist like Lachlan, that he never stopped talking about himself long enough to be curious about anything or anybody.

She disagreed with me. “You’re wrong, darling. He’s just intelligent enough to get it, without being smart enough to see through it or be afraid of it. God knows you’re right about his egotism, but you shouldn’t cry about that. I’m the one who’s going to have to listen to him. And it’s in our favor, anyway. What could be more intoxicating to a conceited gas bag like that than the knowledge that he’s outsmarted us and found out what you’re doing—when he does, of course? And he’s already put one thing over on us. He understands Spanish as well as we do, and we don’t know that. I

suppose you noticed that in all that monologue of his there was never anything about Central America."

"Yes. I noticed that."

"I was afraid he'd brag about it—the way he does everything else—before we had a chance to nail it down. He won't now. Your bawling me out for being a *lengua larga* has scotched that."

She coached me on the Peruvian angle until I felt as if I'd lived there for years. Complete saturation was what she was after, and nothing less would satisfy her. I protested, pointing out that Lachlan had never been to Peru and wouldn't know if I did make a mistake, but she paid no attention. I not only had to know everything about Dr. Rogers; I had to be him.

The next day Juan Benavides showed up and he went through the mill.

It was about two in the afternoon. The buzzer sounded, and he was in the corridor looking very sharp in his electric-blue suit and wide-collared shirt.

"Come in, Juan," I said. I took his hat and he looked around in awe, probably kicking himself for not having started his bargaining at five hundred instead of three hundred dollars.

I gave him a cigarette and called Cathy. She was wearing blue pajamas and a long robe with wide sleeves, and you could see he was much impressed with her. She shook hands and smiled, and then curled up in a big chair.

"We are very fortunate," she said, giving him an approving glance. "Already I can see that Juan is just the man for the job."

From then on he was hers. The two Spanish-speaking gringos were without a doubt completely crazy, but this one was of unbelievable beauty and she thought highly of him.

She told him everything he was supposed to do and say, and then she told him again. She sweated him through it for an hour. I wrote down the telephone number of the hotel where he was staying. We told him to be there where we could reach him any afternoon after four, and then I went back downtown with him and let him pick out the gold watch chain.

"Where is your watch?" I asked.

"Perhaps someday I will have one," he said. "Who knows?"

I gave him some more expense money and asked him about the bus ticket. He thought it over and decided El Paso would be a good place to go.

After I dropped him off I went around to the bus station and bought it. We were all ready for the next act.

On an impulse I ducked into a cigar store and called the Sir Francis Drake. Bolton had checked out and had left no forwarding address. It could mean anything at all, and probably meant nothing, but for a moment I felt a chill just thinking about it. He could tip Lachlan off from anywhere, and we'd never know it until they slipped the handcuffs on us.

When I got back to the apartment she was gone again, and she didn't get back until nearly six. She was elated when she did come in. She'd run into Lachlan and he had taken her down Bayshore to San Jose in that Italian car of his to show her how it performed. Or at least, that was his excuse.

It was good, but I was irritated. "Wait a minute," I said. "How much of this are we going to have, anyway? I mean, going off with him all afternoon __"

She laughed. "Mike, for heaven's sake, have you forgotten who he is? That's Lachlan, the man we both wanted to kill when I was ten years old. Stop growling and listen. We're doing wonderfully."

She'd got a pretty good line on his plans this time and we could set up some sort of timetable. Apparently they had talked a lot. He was going to be around San Francisco for at least another month, she said, before he went back to Mexico for some more fishing. His lawyers wanted him to stay around until they got this latest property settlement worked out.

But that wasn't the big news, she told me excitedly. "He actually stopped talking about himself long enough to ask me what you were doing. Incidentally, he was curious about me, too—his idea being, of course, that I must be the one with money, since you obviously couldn't be. I dispelled that by telling him my father was a bookkeeper for the Lima office of a mining company. I said we both grew up in Peru, but that we didn't meet until we were at Columbia. So now, if it's bothering his sense of logic any, he's right back where he started. You don't do anything resembling work, your father was a missionary, mine was a bookkeeper, and still we live like millionaires."

She jumped off my lap and started prowling the living room the way she always did when she was excited or thinking. She paused to light a cigarette, then waved it at me. "He asked me outright what kind of research you were doing—or had been doing. I was properly evasive about it, and

vague. He wouldn’t have to be a genius to figure out that you had given me unadulterated hell for talking too much the other night and that I still remembered it.

“I told him you’d been at the Hipodromo San Felipe in Lima as a veterinarian for the track, and then somehow”—she paused and grinned wickedly—“somehow we got onto horse doping and saliva tests, and I said that although they weren’t part of your work, you’d become interested in them. Just chatter, you see. And then I shut up and listened to him.”

We ran into Lachlan again that night in the cocktail lounge as we were going out to dinner, but declined his drink invitation a little coolly and eased out without talking to him. The following night we avoided the bar altogether. The thing to do was to let him rest a little.

The night after that, however, we went back and he was there ahead of us, sitting at a booth this time. He stood up and insisted we join him.

The drinks came. “How about having dinner with me tonight?” he urged.

“Why, we’d love to,” Cathy said. “Wouldn’t we, Mike?”

“Sure,” I said, with scarcely any enthusiasm at all.

“Fine,” he said. “I know a swell place down in the financial district. Never find it unless you knew this town like a book.”

Cathy had her head down and was poking into her purse. “Oh, darn,” she said. “I left my lipstick upstairs.” She stood up. “If you’ll excuse me. I’ll only be a minute.”

She went out and we sat down again. I wondered how the thing would come off. She had gone to call Benavides.

She was gone about ten minutes, stalling to give him time. Lachlan and I nursed our drinks and made an attempt at conversation. Without her there it fell apart like bricks without mortar.

I thought about him and tried to figure him out. Somehow he either wasn’t the man I’d always expected or he was putting on an act too. The boasting and ostentatious show of money and bully-boy virility that characterized this middle-aged clown didn’t seem to match up with the cold-nerved piracy of the man who’d engineered a coup like that one in Central America sixteen years ago. Maybe it was just a front, or maybe he was over the peak and softening up now, degenerating into a sort of propped-up wolf chasing girls half his age.

In the face itself there wasn’t much evidence of breakdown. The eyes were steel-blue and sharp and a little too domineering, and the hawk nose and solid jaw gave him the look of a man who was able to take care of himself. Maybe it was in a number of small things. He was a little too loud. He dyed his hair to cover up the gray at the temples. You could see it—the reddish brown around the ears didn’t quite match the rest of it. His clothes were too young for him. He wore double-breasted gray flannel suits with built-in shoulders and Hollywood drape, and topped them off with explosive ties and the modified Texas hat. It was funny, I thought; at first glance, when you knew his record, he looked dangerous, but when you got closer to him he began to sound a little hollow.

Was it an act? That was the bad part of it—there was no way to know until it was too late. But the thing we couldn’t afford to forget for a minute was that he’d lived by his wits for a long time, and he’d always come out on top.

“Mrs. Rogers tells me you used to be with the Peruvian Jockey Club,” he said, leaning back against the white leather.

I shrugged. “Not as a member, if that’s what you mean. I worked at San Felipe as veterinarian for a while. A long time ago.”

“How is the racing down there? Pretty crooked?”

“No,” I said, a little impatiently. “Probably as clean as it is here.”

He gave me a superior smile. “Whatever that means.”

“It means it’s pretty straight. Thoroughbred racing is one of the most rigidly governed sports in the world, and they do a good job of keeping it clean.”

“You think so?” He didn’t, it was obvious. And he had the knack of implying that if I did I was a fool.

I shrugged it off and changed the subject, as if reluctant to talk about horse racing. We got onto fishing, which wasn’t much better. He had only amused tolerance for fly fishermen. In a few minutes Cathy came back.

“More trouble,” she complained with a wry smile as we sat down. “Sometimes I envy men. I had a run in a stocking and had to change it.”

I ordered another round of drinks to make sure Benavides would have time to get here. When we had finished them, Lachlan said, “We’ll take my car. It’s already out front.” We went out through the lobby with Cathy in the middle chattering about something. It was after seven, and when we got out

the big doors in front it was dark except for the street lights and the glow from the sign over the cocktail lounge. Fog was coming in across the hill and cutting off the tops of the buildings. Benavides wasn't in sight. He'd had plenty of time, I thought angrily. Where the devil was he? Then I saw him. He had just come around the corner of the building, walking very fast.

We turned and went down the sidewalk toward Lachlan's car. Just before we reached it I could hear footsteps behind us, beginning to run now, and then he called out.

"Senor Rogers. Doctor! One moment, please."

We all turned, just as he came up and put a hand on my arm. I shook it off angrily, brushing at him with my hand. "Get away," I said irritably, continuing to walk toward the car.

He came after me, talking very fast in Spanish. "Please you must listen. You will tell me when there is another one, no?"

"What are you talking about?" I said coldly. I had him by the arm now, and was hustling him away. "Shut up, you stupid idiot!" I hissed at him, still jockeying him along. I turned to Cathy and Lachlan and apologized in English. "I'm sorry. I'll get rid of him in a minute. You go ahead."

They went on toward the car with Lachlan turning to look curiously over his shoulder. I walked Juan back, being careful not to get completely out of earshot.

"Now, you big-mouthed fool," I lashed at him, winking at the same time, "what are you doing here?"

"Senor Barnes sent me away from Miami. He said he would kill me. But I must have money. I cannot live in this country without money. You will tell me when there will be a long race, no?"

"You're lucky Barnes didn't kill you," I said angrily. "I heard about it. You talked your stupid head off. There was so much comeback money at the track we didn't get five to one." I chopped it off suddenly as if just realizing I was talking too loudly myself.

"But, Doctor, how am I going to live?" he begged. "You must tell me when there is another so I can bet—" He stepped back, holding out his hands, as I made a step toward him.

I took out my wallet and handed him the $260 and the bus ticket, folded up between the bills. "Here," I said. "And you stay away from here. If I see

you around here again, I'll call Cramer. You know what he does to long tongues."

He tried to follow me back to the car, still talking. I waved him off furiously, and he turned finally and shuffled away. He had done it nicely, and I hoped he'd use that bus ticket.

They were in the car waiting, and looked questioningly at me as I slid in beside Cathy. "I'm sorry," I said. "Damned nuisance. The only way you can get rid of him is to give him a couple of dollars."

"Oh?" Lachlan asked casually, easing the car away from the curb. "Do you know him?"

"He used to work for my father, in Peru. Dad brought him back to the States with him three or four years ago, but he won't work any more. Just a bum now."

He didn't say anything more as we drove on down the hill through the early-evening traffic. I was eager for a chance to talk to Cathy, to find out how it had gone over and how much of it they'd been able to hear. All through dinner I was hoping to get a moment alone with her, but I never did. Afterward he suggested we go to the Fairmont, but Cathy begged off, saying she had a slight headache. We came back to the apartment about ten o'clock.

The minute we were inside the door she pulled my head down and kissed me. "You and Benavides should go on the stage."

"Was it all right?"

"Perfect."

* * *

We avoided Lachlan completely for the rest of the week, and then, as she said he would, he came to us. Early in the morning after the Benavides incident I went downtown to the hotel where he was staying, intending to build a fire under him if he was still hanging around. He was gone, however, and the chances looked good that he had taken the bus for El Paso. As soon as we got back to the apartment we packed a couple of bags and took off for Carmel. Everything was under control, and all we had to do was play hard to get and just wait.

It was wonderful at Carmel. I forgot the whole thing for three days, and stopped worrying about Bolton, and Donnelly, and whether the police were watching us. It was a fine time.

We hadn't been back in San Francisco more than a few hours when he called us. He had four tickets to a play at the Geary, he said. How would we like to join him and his date for it, and then go dancing afterward?

"We're beginning to click, darling," Cathy said, looking speculatively at a row of gowns hanging in a closet.

It was easy to see Lachlan had something up his sleeve when we met them downstairs in the cocktail lounge and I got a glance at his date. No aging buck on the prowl would want to be chaperoned by a married couple when he could have been alone with all those natural resources. She was a brown-eyed blonde who overflowed her gown to within a short drool of being arrested for blocking traffic. The gown itself was a plunging-neckline affair in a sort of ripe-avocado green, and above the timber line she looked like whipped cream squeezed out of a tube. Her name was Bobbie Everett and she was in radio, she said, and when I made the obvious and somewhat asinine observation that she ought to be in television she thought that was cute. This was odd, considering that she had probably heard the same remark ten thousand times since TV had taken the bosom to its bosom.

The strategy began to be a little obvious by the time we'd left the theatre and had gone to a night club. Really, I was the most interesting man she'd ever met. Honestly, I was. I simply must tell her all about myself. Working with race horses, imagine that. Didn't I think racing was just simply divine?

She had to have something to report to Lachlan, so I blossomed into a brilliant conversationalist under all this flattering attention and told her all about myself. I told her how to treat bowed tendons.

Of course, I didn't know anything about it, but since practically anything was news to her, I was on safe ground. It was about five dances before I was able to outmaneuver Lachlan and get a dance with Cathy.

"Well," she said, "and how are you and your little friend? You don't seem to be feeling any pain."

"I'm all right," I said. "A little snow-blind, but otherwise O.K."

"Yes," she said, "I thought you looked like a homesick skier. But remember, you're the close-mouthed type. What has she learned so far, besides the fact that your vision seems to be all right?"

“I haven’t told her anything except the story Lachlan already has from you.”

We compared notes as soon as we were back at the apartment. She was elated. There wasn’t any doubt at all now that he was going for it.

“He’s going for something,” I said. “Maybe it’s you.”

“Don’t be silly. Listen, Mike, we’re turning for home now. I can tell. From the things he said tonight—when he wasn’t playing the big shot, of course—I’ve got a pretty good picture of just how much he’s figured out. He knows you’re mixed up in horse racing in some way, but he can’t quite see where or how. I mean, you’re not anywhere near an operating track, you’re obviously not a bookie, and if you were an owner or trainer you’d say so. And that thing Benavides kept saying about a ‘long race’ is getting him. Why should long races be any different from any others? He hasn’t quite enough information to complete the picture, but he will have, very shortly. I’ve got a date with him tomorrow. You don’t know it, of course, but he’s taking me out to lunch.”

Fourteen

We didn’t get up until late, and around noon she went out. She was enchanting in a whole new spring outfit, smart and very lovely from nylons to short-veiled hat, and when she came to kiss me she left a hint of fragrance that lingered in the apartment after she was gone.

“I’m off to betray you, darling,” she said.

I prowled irritably around the apartment. Was he going for it, or was he just going for her? She was convinced he was rising to the bait, but just how sure were we as to what he considered the bait? Maybe, as far as he was concerned, she was it. Lachlan had money already. He didn’t chase girls to get money; he used money to chase girls. And what if Bolton had tipped him off, as he’d threatened, and he was laughing about the whole thing, playing along with us while the police watched, just waiting to spring the trap? I shuddered.

I kept thinking about Bolton, and after a while I started wondering about Charlie and why we hadn’t heard anything of him. After a while I couldn’t stand my thoughts and the apartment any longer and went out and walked downtown. I had to locate a good bookie joint, and they weren’t very plentiful any more. The federal tax and the clampdown by the police had driven most of them out of business. It took a number of telephone calls to some old friends before I got on the trail of one. It was in the rear of a saloon on the other side of Market. I finally got in, and sat around for a while reading a scratch sheet and watching the Santa Anita results go up on the board. I didn’t need the place yet, but I wanted to get the telephone number and be sure I could get in when I did. I made a few random bets, and lost on all of them.

She still wasn’t back when I returned to the apartment. I mixed a drink and sat around thinking of the fine time we’d had at Carmel and wondering if it could ever be like that all the time. Maybe when we finished with

this…I got up and started pacing the floor again. Maybe when we finished with this we'd be in separate penitentiaries.

It was a little after five when she came in, very happy, and ran to kiss me. They'd had lunch, and then gone for a long drive down toward Half Moon Bay.

I mixed her a drink, and she told me. "He has all the parts now, Mike," she said, talking very fast and excitedly. She had changed into lounging pajamas and a blue robe and sandals and was curled up in a big chair with the drink. "He got it out of me at last." She looked across at me and laughed. "I finally told him about the plant that had fascinated you ever since you were a child in Peru and how much research you had done on it. He'd never heard of coca, and the chances are he's down at the library right now, looking it up in the encyclopedia. And when he finds it, he's gone."

That was it. Coca was the detonator, the trigger on this booby trap she had rigged. She'd first learned of it when she was in Peru. Cocaine is derived from it, through an involved chemical process. The Andes Indians chew the dried leaves and it acts as a stimulant. They are able to get by on very little food and can carry tremendous loads for long distances when under the influence of it. Naturally, it's harmful, as is any system of trying to get something for nothing, but that wasn't the point.

The point was that this was one of a series of deadfalls he should have planted in his mind now, and if he followed the trail she had left he should stumble into every one of them. I was interested in the effect of coca, which was a stimulant; I had been a veterinarian at a South American race track and had become interested in something else that wasn't part of my job—the saliva tests they give the winners of races to check for illegal drugs or stimulants, and which are a chemist's job; Benavides had stupidly kept saying something about "long" races while I was trying to shut him up; and last but not least, I had brushed him off and denied very coldly that there could be anything crooked about racing the only time he had mentioned it. All that, plus the fact I apparently had a mysterious source of income I never talked about, was a very neat package.

It should be obvious to anyone who thought about it that if illegal drugs introduced into a race horse would show up in a chemical analysis of his saliva or urine, the same drug would always show up no matter in what form it was used. But with all the overwhelming weight of evidence

pointing in the other direction, he could close his eyes to that and come to the only natural conclusion—the one he wanted: that I had worked out a method of getting some form of coca into a horse and giving him enough edge to win a long race at, say, a mile and a quarter or above, without its being detectable in the tests. That was it—that and the fact that he had got all this information out of her instead of from me, had got it because she was a frivolous chatterbox who didn't have sense enough to keep her mouth shut. He understood Spanish, and he had a way with the ladies. He had put one over on us.

We stayed away from him that night, and we both remained in the apartment until noon the next day. Then I went out alone, picked up the *Examiner,* and wandered into the bar. It was practically deserted except for the single barman on duty in the afternoon. I sat down in a booth, ordered Scotch and water, and spread the paper open at the sports section. I killed two hours there and then went on back to the apartment without ever seeing him. When I came in she said he had called, wanting us to go out with him and Bobbie Everett again. She had begged off, saying she didn't feel up to it.

"I think it's you he's after," I said.

"No," she said. "Wait. Give him time."

The next afternoon I did the same thing, sitting in the bar with a drink and the morning paper open, reading the racing news from Santa Anita and the Florida tracks. Just before I was ready to take down my props and go home, he came in.

"Oh, hello, Rogers," he said, with just a shade too much heartiness. "Mind if I sit down?"

I grunted an invitation of sorts and folded up the paper, giving him just a brief glance at what I was reading. "How's Mrs. Rogers? Hope she's not feeling bad."

"No," I said. "Just a cold."

His drink came. "Well, here's to crime," he said. Maybe that's the latest thing, I thought. He set his glass down suddenly, as if he had just remembered something. "Damnit," he said, "I've been meaning to tell you something. Thought of it the other day. I remembered you were a fly fisherman, and a friend of mine that's here in town now has a big ranch up on the Rogue River. He's always after me to come up when the steelhead

are running, but I don’t care anything about that piddling kind of fishing. Thought you might like to meet him, though. I’ll bring him around and introduce him. He’ll fix you up with some fishing, come summer.”

“Oh, thanks,” I said. “Thanks a lot. I’ve heard a lot about the Rogue, but I never had a chance to fish it.”

“Well, that’s what friends are for, the way I see it.”

“That’s right,” I said, without much enthusiasm.

He was silent for a few minutes, apparently thinking about something.

“Say, Rogers...” I looked up.

“Yes?”

“We hit it off pretty well. And we’ve both been around. I’d like to have a little talk with you. The barman can’t hear us over here.”

I tried to keep my face blank and lit a cigarette to cover up my nervousness. “Talk about what?” I asked.

He leaned forward a little and lowered his voice. “As I said, we’re not kids, so you can cut out the innocent talk with me. I know who you are.”

The butterflies were swarming in my stomach, and it was all I could do to stare back at him without any expression at all. If he had our number, what was he going to do? Call the cops? Was it too late now to run?

“Would you mind explaining what you’re talking about?” I asked, as coldly as I could.

“Cut it out,” he said. Then he winked. “There’s just the two of us here, so you can let your hair down. I’ve known all along you were cleaning up some way, but it took me a while to figure it out. How about letting me in on something good?”

I could feel the sigh of relief coming all the way up from the bottom of my lungs and choked it down before it got away from me. It had been a bad moment.

“Look, Lachlan,” I said irritably, now that I had hold of myself again, “what the devil are you talking about, anyway?”

“So you’re going to play it that way?”

“Play what?”

“That hard-to-get stuff. Good God, man, all I want is just a tip now and then. That’s not much to ask, is it?”

“Maybe I’m a little dense today,” I said wearily. “Or I never did learn the English language too well. Would you mind drawing me a picture?”

He leaned back in the seat and watched me for a moment, and then the nasty smile began to spread across his face. He was getting ready to let me know he had me.

“Yeah. If you insist, I’ll draw you a picture, Rogers. You’re a pretty slick customer, but there are others around. I’ll tell you something you didn’t know. I happen to speak Spanish as well as you do. And I heard your little argument with your friend the other night. You remember, the one who used to work for your father?” He chuckled.

I let it hit me in the face, just a glancing blow he would be able to see for an instant; then I went blank again. “All right,” I said, “so you’re a linguist. I still don’t see what you’re driving at.”

He leaned on the table again. “The hell you don’t. That boy was yelling something about ‘long races.’ I couldn’t figure it out at the time, but I’ve got it now. We both know what you’re doing, so why not cut it out and be a good guy and let me in? I know how to keep my mouth shut, if that’s worrying you, and I won’t bet heavy enough to tip anything.”

“Wait a minute,” I said. “Let me get this straight. You’re suggesting I’m mixed up in horse racing? Is that it? That I’m getting information of some kind?”

He grinned again. “Now you’re talking sense. Except that I’m not suggesting anything—I know. And I don’t mean ‘information.’ I mean fixed races.”

I stared at him. “Don’t be a fool. There’s no such thing as a fixed race.”

He shook his head. “Boy, you’re a hard nut to crack. Look, Rogers, I not only know you’ve got a way to gimmick a race now and then; I even know the kind you gimmick and the way you do it without getting caught. Now, will you come off it?”

I sighed and put down my glass. “Are you really serious about this, Lachlan, or is it a gag of some kind?”

“Of course I’m serious.”

“Well, look. I’ll tell you a few things. I used to work around race tracks as a veterinarian, so maybe I know at least as much about racing as you do. And one of the things I do know is that there is absolutely no such thing as a fixed race. Did you ever stop to figure out how many different and unpredictable factors there are to contend with in just one race? In an average field of eight horses, say? There are eight jockeys, eight horses,

eight pole positions, good racing luck, bad racing luck, jams on the turns, injuries and a thousand other things. And if you were fool enough to try bribing riders, there never have been and never will be eight crooked jockeys in one race. The odds against it are astronomical. There might be one you could buy, or even a slim chance of two, but not eight. At least six, and probably all eight, would report you to the stewards, or at least laugh in your face. They make a living riding horses, and if they got caught in something like that they'd be out on their tails in ten minutes."

"Cut it out," he interrupted. "I'm not talking about crooked jockeys. Don't be so pigheaded. I know you hype 'em. Or your men at the track do."

"Doping, you mean?" I snorted. "Didn't you ever hear of the saliva test?"

"Sure." He had that wise grin on his face again. He looked at me and said slowly, "Sure. I've heard of it. And I happen to know you've got a way to beat it."

I got up. "Well, there's no use arguing with you. I can see that. Think anything you want, but"—I stopped and stared coldly down at him—"don't bother me with it any more. I don't go for it."

I went off and left him sitting there. As I was going up in the elevator it suddenly struck me, that thing she had said a long time ago in Reno. She'd said he would come to me, demanding to be let in on a fixed race, and that the way to convince him there really was such a thing was to deny it could even exist.

* * *

The next move was up to him, and he did exactly what she had said he would. The next morning the telephone rang and she answered it.

"Oh, how are you?" she asked, a little breathlessly. "Why, no, he isn't in. He went downtown this morning." She looked across at me and winked, with the deadpan innocence of a child. There was silence for a moment while she listened. "Well, I—I really shouldn't… Oh, yes, it would be perfectly all right, of course… Well, all right. I'll meet you there in the bar. But only this once. I'll leave a note saying I've gone to the movies."

She hung up and looked over at me and grinned. "El Prado, for lunch."

She was gone until nearly three, and when she came in she didn't say anything for a moment. I could see she was bursting with something, though, and after she came over and kissed me and rumpled my hair she opened her purse without a word and dropped a sheaf of bills on the sofa. I looked at them. They were century notes, and they came to a thousand dollars.

"All right," I said, waiting.

"It was just as if I had written the part for him and he'd spent all night memorizing his lines." She sat down and lit a cigarette. "Mike, it was so easy it wasn't even any fun. He said he knew what you were doing, and there was no use my trying to cover up any more. Oh, he was quite brutal about it. He had me, you see. I was slipping out and meeting him. I tell you, sweet, that conceit of his is something that has never been approached. It's awe-inspiring. So I broke down and told him everything. Then he turned on the Lachlan charm, which seems to consist largely of breathing on you and bugling and trampling the shrubbery, and said everything was going to work out fine. We're going to double-cross you, you see.

"I went on to explain that it wasn't quite as easy as that. A lot of times I never did know myself when you had a deal coming up or what horse it was. You see, you're very hard and mean, and you never tell anybody anything. I told him you actually shot at a man once, for talking too much. He should find that easy to believe, after the way you brushed him off yesterday. Oh, I gave him a good story about all the double-frammis times frammis-squared elements that went into it—how you never knew for sure until just a few hours before racetime that it was a deal because they had to wait to get a line on the probable odds, since they never dealt in short-priced horses, and because they didn't want too much money bet too soon, for some silly reason you had tried to explain to me but which I could never understand. I'm the bird-brain type, you see. Anyway, you usually get the telephone call from the track just in time for you to get your money bet, and most of the time I don't know anything about it until it's all over.

"I told him I'd do what I could, and that if I could possibly find out when one was coming off and what the name of the horse was I'd try to get in touch with him without letting you know. All very uncertain and iffy, you understand. Naturally, that wouldn't do at all, so then he came up with the

perfect solution.” She stopped and looked at me with her eyes brimming with laughter. She nodded toward the money. “I’m to get it bet, if I can.”

“O.K.,” I said. “We’ve got him. But there’s one thing. You let him give you too much money.”

“Why?”

“Well, he has to win this one, of course, for the come-on. And to make it look good we’ve got to set up a specific race—a long race, naturally, something a mile and a furlong or over—so you can show him what he won it on. Suppose a real long shot comes in? You may have to fork over fifteen or twenty thousand dollars. That’s pretty big bait.”

She shook her head, gesturing with the cigarette. “Naturally, I’m not going to bet all of it. I just couldn’t get it placed, because there wasn’t enough time. That’s part of the tease, you see. So when I do figure out a way to get past you and make a really good bet for the Happy Conspirator, he’ll unload like a dropped piggie bank.”

“That’s better,” I said.

“But wait,” she went on. “That’s not all. We’re going to carry your idea of a specific race one step further. I’m going to give him the word that I’ve got part of his money bet and tell him the horse, before the results come in over the radio.”

“How?” I asked. “The only way you can do that is to call some bookie for the results. They usually have them a few minutes to a quarter hour before the radio station gets around to them, but it’d be fairly obvious. He’d see through that.”

“Not if I’d been sitting in the bar with him for the past hour or two and he knew I hadn’t called anybody.”

“Fine,” I said. “But if you’d been sitting there with him for that long, why hadn’t you told him the name of the horse before?”

“Because,” she said, grinning, “you were there too. And of course I couldn’t say anything in front of you. The minute you leave, I tell him. And then in maybe ten minutes the results come in over the radio in the bar, and sure enough, the horse has won.”

“It sounds wonderful,” I said. “But how?”

“I’m working on it. The first thing we need is a telegram. You go downtown in the morning and send me one.”

We worked out the details. It was a beautiful piece of skullduggery, but it was going to take very precise timing to make it work. I went down the next morning and sent the telegram, and when it came we steamed it open so the envelope could be resealed, and saved it.

To make the whole setup look good we had to make him wait, and the longer he waited, the better it would be. The tension started to build up again as I got to thinking of Bolton and the police, and I was growing jumpy and irritable. He called her twice, wanting to know what was happening, and she stalled him. I kept watching the papers for a spot that looked good, and on the fourth night, when the morning papers hit the street, I found one. The eighth race on the next day's card at Hialeah was at a mile and a quarter, a claiming affair for cheap horses. I bought a Racing Form and went back to the apartment to check on it.

It looked fine. The horses were a sorry lot, nonwinners since the first of the year, and there was nothing that stood out. The public selectors didn't agree on anything, and unless the Miami papers all happened to hit on the same horse, there wouldn't be any outstanding favorite. This was fine, because if there was a standout at a short price and he accidentally stumbled home in front it wouldn't look too good. We were supposed to be dealing in long shots. It looked as if Country Mile, Sweet Bobo, and Dinny's Queen would get most of the play, but in a field like that anything could win.

"This is the one," I said. "Let's go."

"How many entries?" she asked.

"Nine. We won't get the scratches until too late, but we can handle nine all right."

We wrote them all down, with a code word consisting of a masculine name opposite each horse, and spent an hour memorizing them. There couldn't be any slip, for if she got the wrong horse the whole thing would blow up. Around ten she called Lachlan, but he wasn't in.

She tried again at midnight and got him. "Hello," she said very quietly. "No. He's in the bath. I just now got a chance to call. There may be something coming up tomorrow about—you know. He just got a phone call from Miami. No, I didn't hear much of it, but there won't be anything certain until morning, anyway…Yes, I'll try." Then she added hurriedly, "I've got to hang up now. I'll call you."

In the morning we went downtown together around eleven o'clock. She was supposed to hurry back alone just before one, call him from the apartment, and tell him excitedly that she had wonderful news and to meet her downstairs at the bar. Posttime for the eighth at Hialeah would be between two-thirty and two-forty p.m., Pacific time, and this would put her in the bar with him about an hour and a half before the race was even run. And she was going to tell him the name of the horse she had bet his money on. The gimmick was that I had to walk into the bar right behind her, before she could say a word to him.

When we got downtown we checked to be sure he wasn't following us, and then went up to the Starlite Roof of the Sir Francis Drake for a drink and on over to a place on Geary for lunch. It was twelve-thirty when we came out of the restaurant. We parted and she walked on down toward Powell to get a cab in front of the St. Francis. I went the other way, intending to pick up a scratch sheet and see how many horses were out of the race.

It was just luck that I noticed him. He went by without looking at me at all, going in the opposite direction, the way she was headed. I froze up, not moving, waiting to be sure. Maybe he hadn't seen her. The hell he hadn't. He was following her. I turned and took after the two of them and when I caught up with him he was about thirty feet behind her. She never did look back. I grabbed his arm and wheeled him around.

"Looking for somebody, Donnelly?" I asked.

There was no expression on his face. "Well," he said. "It's Strong Boy. And still grabbing at people."

She had flagged a cab and was climbing in. I took a deep breath of relief, and then it cut off suddenly as a big hand, descended on my shoulder from behind.

"You ought to grab somebody your own size, pal," a voice said in my ear, and I turned, realizing too late that Donnelly'd had a convoy. The big slab of a face on a level with mine was tough and the eyes were full of a sour humor.

"Old friend of yours, Monk?" he asked Donnelly.

"I was following the broad and he loused it up."

"Well, maybe he knows where she lives."

"Yeah," Donnelly said. "Yeah. Maybe he does."

“I tell you how we could find out,” the humorist said. “We could ask him. Maybe he talks.”

“Yes,” I said. “I know where the broad lives. She lives with me.”

“Well, that’s nice. And where do you live? With her, I suppose.”

“That’s right.”

“You walk behind him, Monk, and I’ll walk on his right. Come along, pal.”

It was in the sunlight of high noon on Geary Street with a thousand people going by. They couldn’t do it.

“You couldn’t shoot here in the street,” I said.

“I’ll tell you how you can find out.”

I went.

Fifteen

It was only about two blocks away, a small hotel with a potted palm in the lobby. We went up to their room. Donnelly took the gun out of the holster under his left arm and clicked the safety off. He sat down on the bed and lit a cigarette, tipping his head to one side to let the smoke curl up.

The big man rocked on his feet and slammed me in the stomach. I fell back against the wall with my left arm across the rickety dresser. I got up, feeling sick, and lost my head. I started for him.

Donnelly motioned with the gun. “Uh-uh.” It was like something out of a gangster movie.

He hit me again and I slid down the wall to the floor, trying to get my breath.

“Ask him where the babe lives,” Donnelly said.

“Where does the babe live?”

I couldn’t say anything. I couldn’t even breathe.

“Where’s the babe live?”

I shook my head and he hauled me to my feet and hit me again. He must have been a pro at one time, because he didn’t break his hands up hitting me in the face. He hit me in the belly.

“Where’s the babe?”

It was the lunch, and the water I’d drunk. I was in agony. He hit me again.

“He ain’t going to talk,” Donnelly said. “If we beat him up enough to make him sing he’ll be too big a mess to get out of here without the cops on us.”

“He’ll talk, all right. I been saving that one.”

“He’d just pass out. Leave him go.”

“The hell.”

“Leave him go.”

“How about one for the road?”

“What did I say?” Donnelly asked.

“All right.”

They waved me out the door. I could still stand up, and I made it. It didn’t add up, but I was too sick to think about it. Then I was in the street and breathing again and I knew how crazy it was. He wanted to know where Cathy was and he wouldn’t give up that easily. I walked to the corner before I arrived at the obvious answer. They were going to follow me. I looked back, but I didn’t see them. I turned a corner, walked another block, and turned again, watching the people behind me for a repeater. By the time I got down to Market I had him spotted. It wasn’t Donnelly or the big man, but someone I hadn’t seen before, a middleweight in a tan topcoat and high-crowned snap-brim hat. He was following me, all right, and I couldn’t go back to the apartment unless I could shake him.

Then suddenly I remembered, and I felt cold all over. I looked at my watch. It was five minutes of one. Cathy would be coming down to the bar to meet Lachlan and tell him the news she didn’t have yet, depending on me to be there to queer it until we got the results of the race. If I didn’t show up, the whole campaign was wrecked. What could she tell him? That she had bet his money, but she didn’t know the name of the horse? I started to run, looking for a telephone booth, frantic with fear that I was already too late.

There was a drugstore on the corner and I hurtled in, sidestepping customers and plowing my way to the booth at the rear. There was a woman in it, and a man waiting. I started to turn and run back to the street to look for another one when I saw the woman hang up and reach for the door.

I beat the man to it. “Pardon me. Emergency. Wife. Ambulance.”

He took one look at my face and stepped back. “Sure,” he said.

I dropped a coin in and dialed. The line was busy. I dug out the coin and popped it back into the slot. I got another busy signal. God, did they have only one trunk out of that board? Was everybody in the building calling out at once? I dialed again.

“Good afternoon, Montlake Apartments.”

“Dr. Rogers,” I said. “Nine-A.”

It was too late. She was certain to have started by this time. I could hear the telephone ringing. It rang again. And again. We were sunk.

Then it clicked, and I could feel the breath ooze out of me.

“Cathy?”

“Mike! I was just going out the door.”

“Don’t,” I said frantically. “Hang on until you see me getting out of a cab in front. I can’t explain now. But hold everything.”

“All right. But hurry.”

I went back out front. He was standing by a newspaper rack, reading the headlines and watching the door. I started down Market, walking slowly. When I saw a cab coming with no others behind it I waited until it was almost abreast and then leaped to the curb, waving my arm. He stopped and I climbed in. I could see my man standing by the curb, listening.

“Palace Hotel,” I said.

“Right, Chief.”

When we reached the next corner I leaned forward in the seat. “Never mind the Palace. Make it the Montlake.” My stomach felt as if I’d been stepped on by an elephant.

I looked at my watch again as I hurried into the lobby. It was nine minutes past one. Lachlan would already be in the bar. Everything now depended on my finding the right bellboy. He was a smart kid named Barney, with an alert eye for the easy dollar. I spotted him over near the desk and caught his attention.

I got him off to one side, reaching in my pocket at the same time. “You’ve got to do me a favor, Barney. I’ve got a big bet on a horse in the eighth race at Hialeah,” I said, almost whispering, and looking around the lobby like a criminal. “My wife’d raise hell if she knew it. So I want you to call the bookie for me and find out who won. Can you do that?”

“Sure, Doctor,” he said, eyeing the ten spot in my hand. “Where’ll you be?”

“In the bar. Or the apartment. Try the bar first. She’ll be with me, so write it on something and say it’s a phone call. No. Wait,” I said, hauling out the telegram. “I’ve got a better idea. Write it on this. On the front side of the wire. And then seal it up again. Say it’s a telegram that just came for me. You got that?”

“Sure.”

“You know the phone numbers of any bookies?”

He shook his head. “I used to know plenty. They’re hard to find now, though.”

“Well, here.” I handed him the slip of paper with the telephone number of the horse parlor I’d located.

I could see her stepping out of the elevator now. It was timed beautifully. She came toward us.

“Oh, there you are, dear. You’re late. I want a drink before lunch.”

“I’ll be right with you.”

She looked at us a little suspiciously. “What are you doing?”

“Just telling Barney I was expecting an answer to a wire, and where he could find me. You run along. I’ll be right with you.”

She started into the bar. Barney and I grinned at each other. “Remember, the race’ll be off around two-thirty-five. Call that bookie right away, and keep calling until you get it. And bring it right in. I’ve got too much on this one.” I handed him the ten.

“I know how you feel,” he said.

She had gone through the door now. I gave her a few more seconds, walking very slowly. When I came she had just sat down at the booth with Lachlan and was talking eagerly, her face alight with excitement. She looked up and saw me and her eyes went blank as she cut it off.

I walked up. “I thought I saw you coming in here when I got out of the cab. What are we drinking?”

Lachlan and I nodded. Cathy recovered and began chattering about something to cover the awkward pause. I sat down in a chair at the end of the table and ordered Scotch.

It should have been amusing, sitting there knowing Lachlan was raging to find out what Cathy had to tell him and knowing there wasn’t anything he could do about it. It wasn’t, however, for I wasn’t even thinking about it. Not any more. I was thinking about the fact that Donnelly was in San Francisco looking for her, and knew she was here, and that he had help now. Our time was running out so fast you could see it go.

San Francisco’s not New York, and looking for somebody who’s transient and who would be living the way she would is easy. You just cruise around Powell Street and Union Square and Nob Hill, and it’s only a question of time.

I tried to shake it off and get back to the matter at hand. We had to keep Lachlan here because the thing would be pointless unless she was with him every minute so he’d know she hadn’t had a chance to get the results of the

race. There wasn't much chance he would leave, but I held the bait out where he could see it.

"Have to get back downtown in a little while," I said to Cathy, pretending to be unaware of the tension around the table. "Just time for a drink or two. Unless you want to have lunch?"

She glanced at Lachlan. "No, dear. I don't think so. Why don't you get something downtown?"

I knew she was wondering what held me up and why I'd sounded so strange over the telephone, but there was no way I could tell her. Time dragged. I ordered another round of drinks. Lachlan stalled as long as he could, hoping I would leave, but finally gave in and ordered.

"What time is your appointment, dear?" Cathy asked, making a good act of being impatient and trying not to show it.

I shrugged. "Any time after two-thirty."

The conversation would flare up for a few minutes, then die out until somebody prodded it again. Two-thirty came, and then two-forty-five. The strain was getting me now. What was keeping Barney? All the horse parlors should have it by this time. We had to have it before the radio station put it on the air.

I was just starting to sweat in earnest when I saw him hurrying in from the lobby entrance. Paying no attention, I picked up my glass and started to take a drink.

"Dr. Rogers. Oh, Dr. Rogers."

I turned. "Yes?"

"Telegram," he said. "It just came, and I thought you were here in the bar."

"Thanks," I said. I handed him a dollar.

They were both watching me. I was at the end of the table, and of course they couldn't see anything but the back of the telegram. I tore the envelope open and pretended to read. Barney had written it in pencil down in one corner. "Devil's Toupee," it said. I was conscious of thinking it was an awful name for a horse and it was no wonder he was running in two-thousand-dollar claimers. There was no payoff price, so Barney must have got it right off the griddle, before they posted it. I hoped it was official.

I stood up. They looked at me inquiringly. "It's from Carl," I said to Cathy. "I'd better call him. I'll see you later."

I folded the wire, stuck it in my pocket, and went out. “Carl” was the code name for Devil’s Toupee, and now she could tell him the name of the horse she’d bet his money on. They’d get the bartender to turn on the radio to the station that broadcast the race results between recordings.

It was a smooth trick. Of course, a sharper would probably see through that telegram stunt and would know I had told her some way, but the thing that Lachlan would never get past was the fact that she had started to tell him almost two hours ago, when I came in and she had to shut up. That was the snapper, and it was a good one.

I hurried across the lobby and went up to the apartment. Switching on the radio, I tuned in the station. There was music at first and then, after a commercial, the announcer came on with the results of the third at Santa Anita. Then there was another recording. I began to worry. Suppose it had already been broadcast? The whole thing would be like a joke without a punch line. I was curious about the price, too, because that was important. Devil’s Toupee should have been a long shot.

There was another long-winded commercial. Then it came. It was Devil’s Toupee, Country Mile, and Ladyboots. Devil’s Toupee paid $26.80, $14.60, and $9.00. I whistled, and did a quick calculation. She was going to tell—or had already told—Lachlan she had managed to get $400 of his money bet, so she’d have to pay off $5,360. That was a lot of bait. But it was going to be irresistible—better than twelve to one on a sure thing.

It was. She came in full of excitement about twenty minutes later and told me how it had gone.

“He’s got it,” she said, perching on the arm of my chair. “That easy-money fever. You could see that look in his eyes, and his hands were trembling after the announcer gave the payoffs. It’s not the money, Mike. It’s a disease. He’s helpless now, like a baby. I mean, the whole thing went off so perfectly. He’d fight you now if you even tried to tell him it was a gag.

“Just as I knew he would, as soon as I told him the name of the horse, he made the bartender turn on the radio so we could wait for the results. Then he dug up a newspaper that was around the bar and looked up the public selectors’ picks.

There are three of them, you know, and each one had three horses in that race, and not one of them even mentioned Devil’s Toupee. I just smiled at

that, of course. Then when the results came in—that's all, brother. He's a sitting duck."

She stopped to light a cigarette, and laughed at me through the smoke. "Then, of course, he started to cry because he didn't have more money on it. I told him it was just impossible; I didn't have enough time and bookies were too scarce now. And that I was taking a long chance, crossing you that way, even getting four hundred down. I said he had no idea what you were like when it came to letting out information—that you wouldn't let your own mother in on it, and so on. I said you were dangerous in a rage and I was afraid of what would happen if you found out. He climbed down then and became very apologetic. I'm too good a thing to alienate, you see, and he has to keep me buttered up. Of course it wasn't my fault. I'd done beautifully. The only thing was, he just had to figure out some way to get a real bet made the next time."

"O.K.," I said. "The thing to do is let him stew in his own juice for a while. He'll be desperate to get that bet down by the time you have a way figured out for him to do it." I stopped and looked at her. "There's just one catch. We haven't got much time."

She stared at me. "Why? We've got all the time there is."

"No, we haven't. Donnelly's here in town. Looking for you."

"Oh, Donnelly's foot!" she exclaimed impatiently. "I wish you'd quit worrying about that moronic pipsqueak." She broke off suddenly, just remembering. "So that's what it was? With all this other stuff, I forgot about it. What happened?"

I told her. She was furious at first. "Why, that chiseling little vermin! We ought to—" She stopped.

"That's it, exactly," I said. "We ought to—what? Call the police? He hasn't done anything—yet. And, if I might point it out, we're not in a very good position ourselves to be jumping into the lap of the police force."

She quieted down a little. "What do you suppose he's up to, Mike? I mean, having those other two men with him?" It was the first time she'd ever shown any inclination to regard Donnelly as anything but a stupid punk, and now she wasn't scared so much as curious.

"I don't know," I said. "But I don't like it."

It scared me to think about it, but there wasn't anything to do but sweat it out. We couldn't give up on Lachlan and run. That was unthinkable, even

before, but now he had over five thousand dollars of our money besides. We had to stick, and every day my nerves would be drawing nearer the snapping point. There wasn't only Donnelly to think about; there was always Bolton. How did we know Lachlan wasn't putting on an act? If he had been tipped off, he'd know we would let him win the first one. The time the police would close in would be just after he'd handed us the money for the big deal.

She saw Lachlan nearly every day, at lunch or in the bar. He was getting the money together. He was thinking bigger all the time; at first it had been fifty thousand, and now it was a hundred thousand he was talking about. And she was needling him with the complete impossibility of it. How could they get that much money bet in the few short hours they'd have to do it? And suppose she didn't find out the name of the horse at all? She was slowly driving him frantic. She'd dangled the easy money there before him, and now she was keeping it tantalizingly just out of his reach, pulling it back bit by bit.

Raising that much cash wasn't easy. Of course, he had plenty of money, but nobody keeps amounts like that lying around in cash. And he had whopping alimony and income-tax payments to meet all the time. He was working on it, though, she said, and could put his hands on sixty thousand right now.

But how was he going to bet it? That was the thing she was driving him crazy with.

Monday night she broke it. She came in from a ride with Lachlan and said, "He's ready, Mike."

"He's not half as ready as I am," I said. "I can't stand much more of this."

"It won't be so bad now. There'll be plenty to do. Your trouble is that you can't stand inactivity and suspense at the same time."

"Doesn't it bother you?"

"Not that much." She smiled. "It's just a war of nerves. All you have to do is outlast the opposition and make him give way first. It's intriguing."

"Sure," I said. "So is Russian roulette. Don't you ever think about what Bolton said?"

"I thought you were a gambler, Mike. It's a calculated risk with the odds on your side. A hundred to one he was bluffing."

“I’m just a piker,” I said. “All I ever gambled with was money.” I went on wearing the same old groove in the carpet. “But if he’s ready, let’s go. I’d rather be dead than alive and waiting for it.”

She smiled again. “We’re already off. You can start looking for the race any time.”

“You’ve already told him, then? I mean, about betting the money?”

She nodded. “Just a few minutes ago. All I had to do was hint at it and he was ready to climb all over me like a big dog. He has eighty thousand dollars in a safe in his apartment and he’s going to give it to me in the morning.”

I tried to fight off the chill. That would be the moment. “Where?” I asked.

“In the bar. I’m going to meet him there around ten.”

“That much cash would be in large bills,” I said.

“Probably thousands, mostly. I thought about that—the serial numbers, I mean. That’s one reason I suggested the bar, at ten o’clock in the morning. It should be practically deserted, and if there’s anybody around I’m not sure of, I can always back out and not take it.”

“They might be outside. Or in the lobby.”

“I’ve thought of that. There’s nothing I can do about the lobby except to look it over before I go into the bar. But you can watch the front of the building from here. If anybody shows up who doesn’t look right, phone me.”

I couldn’t sleep at all that night, and in the morning, a few minutes after ten, when she started down to the bar I could feel the butterflies holding a death dance in the cavern where my stomach should have been.

I stood by the window and watched while time came to a slow crawl and died. What did a plain-clothes cop look like? Like sixty million other men. If anybody got out of a car and started into the bar or into the lobby, could I possibly get through that switchboard to her in time? Nobody came and nothing happened.

After a long time she came back up to the apartment. She had a brown Manila envelope with her and she took it into the bedroom and emptied it out on the bed like a bag of dirty clothes.

I looked at it. It was the first time I had ever seen eighty one-thousand-dollar bills, and the way I felt, I never wanted to see another one. A knock

on the door would have sounded like a hand grenade going off.

Sixteen

The big act was coming up now, the ticklish one, the one that had to go just right. There couldn't be any mistakes from here on out. We had the money, but we had to get out from under without Lachlan's screaming for the cops. We knew how we were going to do it—we hoped.

The angle she had worked out for Lachlan to get his money bet was simple enough. Since there was no way of knowing for certain whether she'd find out when there was another race coming up and what horse was rigged to win it, the thing they had to do was to get me to bet the money when I bet mine. And of course it had to be done without my knowing it, since I was a hard guy who'd cut their throats in a minute if I suspected it. So she had told Lachlan she knew the three betting commissioners who handled my money for me, and had sounded them out on taking some for her. They had agreed, of course, and were willing to bet hers—the whole wad of it—when I telephoned my bets in. Lachlan presumably didn't know—and she was playing it like a dumb chick, pretending not to know—what would happen if somebody began trying to dump eighty thousand dollars on some long shot the morning before a race. That was the gimmick, the thing that was supposed to get us out of the fire.

Actually, Lachlan probably did know, or would if he stopped to think about it, but he had the easy-money fever now and a man isn't completely rational when he's under its spell. He had intimated he knew it, that day when he'd been trying to break down my resistance in the bar, when he'd said he wouldn't talk and he wouldn't bet too much. He was forgetting or ignoring it now, with the lure of the big killing leading him on, but if everything went off according to plan, he'd be reminded of it—but good.

What would happen is simple enough. Nothing scares a bookie like a lot of money on a long shot, unless it's more money on a longer shot. They get fat off favorites, playing the old percentage year in and year out, but they can be wiped out by getting caught with a big bet on some long shot that

happens to win. Most of them won't pay track odds above twenty to one, but even that can be disastrous if they get caught with a wad, say a thousand or two thousand dollars' worth.

They'll take it in small amounts, but when somebody starts trying to shove chunks of it in on some horse that figures to go to the post at a long price, they get suspicious and scared and start laying it off—that is, betting it on the horse themselves with bigger bookies who handle that sort of thing. And a lot of it winds up back at the track, being bet through the pari-mutuel windows, which of course drives the price down. If the horse does win, then, they've saved themselves in two ways: they've hedged their bets, and they've driven the price down to where it isn't disastrous.

And she and Lachlan—so Lachlan thought—were going to unload eighty thousand dollars on the horse and not upset the applecart. It was a laugh.

She had to make several trips downtown to make all this look good, and of course I couldn't go with her, just in case Lachlan was keeping an eye on us. I'd be in the wringer every minute she was gone, thinking of Donnelly, and I made her take a taxi every place she went and keep the cab waiting for her.

We had to have the right race now. Tuesday night there was nothing that looked good. A mile-and-a-sixteenth was the longest race on the next day's card, and that was a handicap for high-class horses, which wouldn't do at all. Wednesday night we drew another blank, the only race at any distance being at Fairgrounds, and that wouldn't do because we were supposed to be operating in Florida. We had to get something soon. Every day of delay was an agony of sheer suspense. Thursday night I hung around the stand that sold the Form, waiting for it to be flown in from Los Angeles. It was late again, and didn't come in until around ten. I grabbed one and went back to the apartment. This time I found it. It looked fine.

Again, it was the eighth, a mile-and-one-half claiming race for three-thousand-dollar horses. There were only eight entries, and nearly all the public selectors liked Torchy and Smoke Blue, with Tanner's Girl getting a nod here and there. Tanner's Girl looked like what I was after. She was a seven-year-old mare who'd won only three out of nineteen starts last year and one out of eight so far this year, all of them in two-thousand- and twenty-five-hundred-dollar claimers. But the race she'd won this year had

been the last time out, a little over two weeks ago right there at Hialeah, just managing to hold on to take the winner's end at a mile and a furlong, and that was what I wanted. It meant she should have a lot of support at the track. A lot of horse players seem to have the idea that a horse that won last time should win again, an idea that helps in keeping them broke. What we had to have was a horse that would go at a comparatively short price and finish somewhere up the track, and Tanner's Girl looked as if she could do both.

Of course, we could have cut out the risk by not letting Lachlan know what horse it was until after the race was over, to be sure the horse we "bet" on didn't win, but that would spoil the whole plan. He had to know in advance which horse it was, and before we got through he'd know why she lost.

In the morning at nine o'clock we cut it loose and let it roll. She called Lachlan.

"Hello?" she said eagerly. "He just left. A few minutes ago… Yes…Yes. It's wonderful news. He got a telephone call from Miami at eight-thirty, and I heard it this time. It's a horse called Tanner's Girl in the eighth race. The minute he left, I called the betting people. They've already started. The only thing is..." She hesitated.

Then she went on hurriedly, and a little apologetically. "What I mean is, it all came up so suddenly I didn't get all the money placed with those men. There's ten thousand I was going to give to another one… Martin, please. I couldn't help it I tell you I did my best… But—But Martin, can't you see? It's still all right That's the reason I called you. You still have three hours or more. I'll bring it down and meet you in the bar and give it to you right now. And if that's the way you're going to act, you can bet your old money yourself," she wound up defiantly, like a little girl on the verge of tears.

She was silent for a moment, listening. "That's all right. I didn't mean it either. Of course I'll help. You wait in the bar, and I'll bring it right down."

She hung up and winked at me, grinning. "Let him get around that," she said.

That was another reason we had to let him know the horse in advance. She was giving back ten thousand dollars of it to make him bet it himself. It was costly, but she was buying a psychological advantage that would be worth it. Take your old money and bet it yourself. I don't want anything to

do with it. And when it was coupled with the snapper ending she had worked out, it might get us off the hook. Might, I thought. San Quentin was full of guys who were sure they were off the hook.

She took ten of the bills out of the envelope and went down to the bar. In about ten minutes she was back. That was the way it was supposed to go. Once she was down there she suddenly remembered she couldn't go downtown looking for bookies because that's where I was and she might run into me. He'd have to do it alone.

I stood by the window and watched him leave. Unless he broke that wad into a lot smaller chunks, he was going to leave a trail of very suspicious bookies behind him—that is, if he found any bookies. A man who appeared to be in his right mind trying to unload ten thousand dollars in one piece on a nag like Tanner's Girl might start them laying off what Tanner's Girl money they already held. Bookmakers have remarkably little faith in the inherent nobility of man. And anything being bet back at the track would help to knock the price down.

We went over the timing for the last time, and then I left for downtown. It was a little after ten. The race should be off at around two-thirty-five. I bought a scratch sheet at a newsstand on Market and looked it over while I had a cup of coffee. Only one horse had been declared. The ideas of the public selectors were about the same as those in the Form, with Torchy and Smoke Blue getting most of the notice. Tanner's Girl was mentioned a few times, but never at the top.

I went over to the bookie joint. A few men were sitting around reading scratch sheets. Tanner's Girl was eight to one on the Morning Line, down in the fourth spot in a field of seven. Torchy was the favorite at three to two. I began to tighten up now. Too damn much depended on it. It wasn't money we were playing with now; it was freedom. Suppose Tanner's Girl won? We should have done it the other way and not told Lachlan the horse until after the race. But no, I thought, we couldn't get out of the fire that way. It would be too obvious. It would smell.

I started getting the jitters about Tanner's Girl. She had won the last time, hadn't she? For God's sake, I thought, I'm beginning to sound like a two-dollar horse player trying to make up his mind. I couldn't quit worrying, though, and bought another Form to check again.

She couldn’t win. Any fool could see it. She was seven years old and she’d have lost any semblance of form she’d had two weeks ago when she won at a mile and a furlong. You couldn’t keep a horse that old up to racing edge more than a few days. And God knows she hadn’t had much then. She’d been losing ground all the way through the stretch and just managed to last. And this race was three eighths longer. It was ridiculous; she didn’t have a chance. It didn’t do any good, though. I’d been around long enough to know about the horses that couldn’t win and the horses that couldn’t lose. They ran in bookie joints, not on race tracks.

I couldn’t sit still any longer. I looked at my watch. It was nearly twelve. The results of the first race at Hialeah were already posted. I went out to the bar and drank a glass of beer and then went to the telephone booth.

I looked up the number and dialed Pan American Airways. “Hello,” I said. “I have to go to Japan. I wonder if you could tell me what I’ve got to have in the way of papers and shots and so on, and whether I have to get a military permit of some kind…No, I’m sorry, I can’t hold on right now. I’m late for an appointment. But would you call me at three o’clock sharp with the list? It’s important. Dr. Rogers, at the Montlake…That’s right. Thank you.”

Then I called Braniff and made the same request about Ecuador, and threw in two travel agencies, just to be sure. At least one of them should call right at three p.m. It didn’t make any difference who it was, as long as the telephone rang.

I tried to eat some lunch, but it wouldn’t go down. My throat was dry and I felt the way a matador does watching the door of the toril swing open and seeing the dust boil in the shadows inside as the bull lunges, ready to come out. This is not for me, I thought, staring longingly after the people hurrying back to their offices and desks. All they had to do was go back to work for four hours; they didn’t have to stand still and wait while a bunch of little men braided their nerve ends into twitching coils.

I called Cathy. “Yes,” she said. “He just called me. He’s back. He got some of it bet. Don’t worry, Mike. He’ll be here. I’ve already told him you’re staying downtown. Mike, please don’t stew about it. Of course he’ll be here.”

He had to be at the apartment when the results came in. She had left the door open by telling him I’d be downtown and that she didn’t feel like

coming down to the bar or going out. He'd get around to inviting himself in so they could wait for the results together. Or at least, he was supposed to.

I went back to the horse parlor and sweated it out as the races at Miami slowly became history chalked on a blackboard in the rear of a saloon. The fourth, the fifth, the sixth. I watched them, telling myself Tanner's Girl couldn't win. At two-fifteen the betting on the eighth had begun at the track. I watched the first and second run-downs. Tanner's Girl was seven to one, then five to one, and the odds on Torchy and Smoke Blue were going up. Then Tanner's Girl was nine to two and it was five minutes before posttime. I had to move now, and move fast.

I flagged a cab. We got caught in a traffic jam crossing Market, and I kept looking at my watch and cursing. It was two-thirty-five now and they should be off. In ten minutes or less they'd have the winner. We crawled up Powell, got clear on California, and went on fast. I got out a block from the Montlake and went into the neighborhood bar I had picked out beforehand. It had a telephone booth, and it was only a minute's fast walking time from the apartment.

I ordered a Scotch and looked at the time again. It was two-forty-one. They wouldn't have it yet. They might not have got away before two-forty. I held the drink in my hand in the deserted quiet dimness of the bar, and then in spite of myself I was moving toward the telephone both. I was dialing. "Naw. Naw," the voice said. "Nothing from Florida yet. They're off. That's all."

In the apartment Lachlan would be calling one of the places where he'd made his bets. I had to get it by the time they did and get up there within a minute or two. But that was assuming Tanner's Girl didn't win. If she did, then what? I clawed for the dial again. The line was busy.

I waited while thirty seconds stretched into a year and tried again. This time I got it. "Yeah?" the bored voice said. "The eighth at Florida? Yeah, we just got it. Nag by the name of Seven Sharps."

"Tanner's Girl! What about Tanner's Girl?" I yelled. She hadn't won, but I couldn't seem to get my mind to accept it. Maybe I'd have to go down there and get him to draw me a picture.

"Out of the money. No prices yet. Y'welcome."

I was out in the street. Lachlan and Cathy would have it now and Lachlan would know he had lost close to eighty thousand dollars. A lot

depended on how long it took for the initial shock to wear off and for the thing to begin to soak in, and I had to get there in a hurry. We had to put him on the defensive before he could get set to attack.

It was a minute and a half including the elevator, and I fought hard to get hold of myself. I came down the corridor whistling something and clicked the keys a little as I pushed one against the lock. It didn’t fit, and I tried the next one, taking my time, fighting for coolness. Everything depended on the next few minutes and what I saw when I opened the door.

Seventeen

I turned the key and stepped inside, humming. “Where are you, baby?” I said.

She was standing in the center of the living room, alone, facing me, and when she winked I could feel the strain break inside me like a snapped violin string. She’d done it, as she’d said she would. She had hit him before he could recover, taking the play away from him and going panicky when they got the news, crying out that something had gone wrong and I’d be raging. And then, within a minute, they’d heard me outside the door.

“Mike—” You could hear her trying to cover up the terror in her voice. “Darling, I—I thought you were going to wait downtown. I mean, wasn’t there a race?”

I went over and kissed her, pretending to notice nothing wrong. “Sure. Turn on the radio, will you? I want to get the payoffs.”

She was staring at me with something like absolute horror. “The payoffs? Didn’t you—I mean, haven’t you—”

“I didn’t go to the bookie,” I said, as if I hadn’t heard her. “Ran into George Carnovan in the Oak Room and we got to shaking dice and talking about the Army. You remember George. You met him at Aspen, that time we were up there when it rained and ruined the skiing for three days. He’s got a traveling job now. Some paper outfit.” I broke off and turned around to her. “What’s the matter, Cathy? Turn on the radio. I want to find out what price we got. The results should be on in a minute.”

“Oh,” she said. “All—all right, dear.”

I was feeling a little better now, but the sweat was still clammy on my face. The door to the master bedroom was on the right and it was open, but the one to the dining room, on the left, was just slightly ajar. Lachlan would be in there, then, and she couldn’t make any move that would give it away for fear he was looking as well as listening. There was no way he could get out, so he had to stay and suffer. She’d built me up as a raging maniac when

something went wrong, and in about two or three minutes I was going to know I'd lost a lot of money on Tanner's Girl.

"You didn't get the results, then?" she asked, her voice very small and tight, as if she were out of breath. "You don't know if—if he won?"

"She," I said, struggling for just the right casual tone. "It was a mare, name of Tanner's Girl. Oh, she won, all right. But I want to get the price. According to the scratch sheet she was eight to one on the Morning Line, but well do better than that. Should get twelve to one, anyway."

She didn't say anything. I turned and looked at her, as if just noticing for the first time that something was wrong. "What's the matter, Cathy? Don't you feel well? You look pale."

"I'm all right, dear. I—I mean, did you bet very much on the race?"

"Yes," I said, lighting a cigarette. "My whole quota. Five thousand dollars. But there's nothing to worry about. It was bet late and spread very thin. We'll do all right on the price."

"Your quota?" she asked blankly.

The radio was beginning to warm up now. It was playing music. "Skip it, Cathy," I said, a little irritably. "I've tried a dozen times to explain it to you. It's just a blind spot, I guess. But never mind. I want to hear this."

"Darling," she asked faintly, "could we go down to the bar? I think I'd like a drink."

"In a minute," I said impatiently.

"Please. Right now."

"I said in a minute, Cathy. I want to hear the results of that race."

Unless his nerve was very good, he should be getting the horrors. He might or might not have begun to get the implications of that stuff about the quota and betting late and spreading it thin, but he would as soon as that telephone rang.

"Darling, please." She was doing it nicely. You could hear the horror in it.

"Go ahead," I said. "I'll be down as soon as I get this. Wait." I broke off. The recording had stopped and the announcer was coming on. "This may be it now."

"We now bring you the results of the eighth race at Hialeah," the announcer began. Then the telephone rang. God, I thought wildly, both at once.

“Cathy,” I snapped. “Answer that. I’m trying to listen.”

She picked up the telephone and the clatter stopped. The radio went on: “The winner was Seven Sharps. In the place position it was Smoke Blue, with Miss Pouter third. Seven Sharps paid—”

“What!” I yelled. “What the hell does he mean, Seven Sharps?”

She had her hand over the telephone mouthpiece and was wailing, “Mike! Mike! It’s long-distance.”

“The hell with that. Did you hear—” Then I did a double take on it. “Long-distance? From where? Give me that!”

“It’s Miami,” she said faintly, collapsing into a chair.

I grabbed it out of her hand. “Hello! Hello!” I snapped.

“Dr. Rogers? This is Pan American—” the voice on the other end said, just as I pressed down the arm and broke the circuit. He couldn’t see it, the way I was standing, even if he were looking, and the noise of the radio would cover the click. I didn’t dare leave it down, because it might ring again, but when I let it up I could hear the dial tone.

“Yes. Yes,” I said. “This is Rogers. Go ahead. Carl? Is that you, Carl? Well, what the hell are you people—Yes, I just heard…What do you mean, what am I trying to do out here? I haven’t done anything but take your word, like a damned fool, and expect you to do what you’re supposed to.”

I still had the dial tone. The switchboard operator hadn’t unplugged it yet, but she’d be on the line in a minute. I covered the mouthpiece with my hand, keeping my back toward the dining room.

“What!” I yelled. “Of course I didn’t. Good God, do you think I’m crazy? I tell you it was five thousand, not a penny more. There wasn’t a bit of it placed before eleven o’clock, and it was spread out everywhere. What do you mean, five to one? It couldn’t have been…What?…Listen, you know better than to ask me if I’ve been talking…I don’t care where the money was coming from, there was nothing leaked out here! San Francisco? I tell you it’s impossible… You did what! Why, you stupid idiot, I ought to—Hello! Hello!” I jiggled the hook savagely, then slammed the phone back into its cradle.

Cathy was huddled in a chair, watching me with terrified helplessness. I pretended I didn’t notice her as I went raging across the room.

“Darling,” she asked tremulously, “what—what happened?”

“What happened! I’ll tell you what happened! One of those big-mouthed idiots back there got drunk and started talking, and now they’re trying to blame it on me! Somebody dumped over fifty thousand on that horse, and every bookie in the country was flooded with Tanner’s Girl money by posttime for the first race. They couldn’t even get their bets placed. And then it started pouring back to the track. He said twenty minutes after the mutuel windows opened for the eighth race, Tanner’s Girl was down from eight to one to five to one. So Carl sent the jockey out with instructions to run her into every blind switch he could find, even if he had to get clear off the track and chase her up an alley.”

Of course, the whole thing was a dream. There hadn’t been any big wads of money bet on Tanner’s Girl and probably very little coming back to the track; what had driven the price down was the thing I’d figured on from the first—the old two-dollar bettors out there at the track betting on her because she won last time.

“But why?” she asked, her voice breaking with fright. “Why did they want her to lose?”

“Why? Why? Because they decided I was the one who’d talked! I wasn’t there to defend myself, so I was the goat. They didn’t have anything bet, so why should she win? They cut my throat. They left me out on a limb. They were going to teach me to keep my mouth shut! The dirty, rotten, big-mouthed—” I switched over to Spanish and ran through every dirty name I knew.

I whirled around to her. “Start packing. We’re going back there, and somebody’s going to have his tail in a sling when we get this thing threshed out. Trying to tell me that money was coming from San Francisco.”

I stopped then, as if noticing for the first time the look of horror on her face. I froze dead in my tracks, staring at her.

“Mike! Don’t look at me like that! Mike, please.”

“San Francisco, he said. Well, maybe somebody has been shooting off her little mouth.”

“Darling! Listen! Please.”

“Why, you little tramp!”

She pushed back in her chair, whimpering now. “Mike! I haven’t done anything. Honest!”

“So you wanted to know the name of the horse, didn’t you?” I grew very quiet and started to walk slowly toward her. “I remember now. You asked me what horse it was.”

With a roar of pure rage, I reached for her. I got the front of her blouse and it ripped as I jerked her out of the chair. “Why, you rotten, double-crossing, blabber-mouthed little tramp, I ought to kill you! I see it now. When the filthy pig couldn’t get anywhere trying to pump me, he got it out of you! So we’ve been going to picture shows, have we? Well, aren’t we just too cute!” I let go, and shoved her, and she fell to the floor.

Still cursing, I ran to the desk and yanked open a drawer. There wasn’t any gun in it, because I didn’t own one, but there was a big metal paperweight the size of a .45, and I banged it against the drawer getting it out, and shoved it in my coat pocket.

She was beginning to scream now. “Mike! No! No! No!” She tried to get up off the floor, came up to her knees, and lunged desperately at my legs. “Mike! Please!”

I peeled her off, lifted her, and threw her backward. She crumpled to the floor again, whimpering. “I’ll attend to you when I get back,” I said savagely, and ran toward the door. I could hear her still whimpering with terror as I slammed it.

Lachlan’s apartment was two floors above, but I didn’t bother with the elevator. I took the stairs two at a time, and was halfway up there before I suddenly remembered there wasn’t any necessity for acting, now that I was out of sight. The longer I was gone, the more time he’d have to get out of the apartment and run. I slowed down.

A Filipino boy in a white jacket answered the ring and I shoved past him before he could do more than utter a startled grunt. I plowed into the living room and looked wildly around. “Where’s Lachlan?” I demanded, with my hand on the paperweight in my coat pocket.

He was scared. “He not here. Go out long time ago.”

“Where is he?” I asked menacingly. I had to put on a good act because Lachlan would get in touch with him or come back sooner or later, and the more I scared the kid, the better story he’d give Lachlan.

“No understand.” He was taking refuge in pidgin English and pretending he didn’t know what I was talking about. I switched to Spanish and chewed

him out, and he got that, all right. I went through all the rooms, pretending to be putting on a big search, but just stalling for time.

I came back to the living room, still looking wild and scaring the houseboy. I stood by the desk near the door, glaring around like a man who still hopes to find somebody to shoot, and I don't know what made me glance down at the mail lying there. There were two or three opened letters and one envelope with its end slit. Maybe it was the foreign stamp that attracted my attention. The return address was printed, some construction company in Belize, British Honduras, and typed in above it was "Harold E. Goodwin, Supt."

Like a man in a dream, I reached down and picked it up and slid the letter out. "Dear Mart," it began, "It's been some time since I've heard from you and I just thought I'd drop you a line and see if you have any plans for coming back to our old stamping grounds any time soon…"

I slid it back into the envelope and dropped it on the table. I was numb. I had forgotten Lachlan. I was thinking of a two-story house in a little desert town on the edge of the sand dunes and a man named Howard C. Goodwin and his wife. Suddenly it all balled up and hit me at once. I'd run up here as part of an act, pretending to be in a murderous rage because she'd lied to me, and when I got here I found out she had.

With an effort I pulled myself together. There wasn't time to think about that now. We had to get out from under Lachlan. I shouted something threatening at the houseboy for the last time, and ran out the door. I'd been gone five or six minutes now, and it should have been long enough for him to get out of the apartment. And it was. When I got back, he was gone.

And so was Cathy.

I stood there, looking stupidly around the empty living room. Where could she have gone? This wasn't part of the act. She was supposed to be here. The radio had been turned off and it was unbearably silent after that crescendo of violence, and I couldn't adjust myself to the abrupt letdown. I wanted to make a noise of some kind, or run.

It had been only five minutes. She couldn't go anywhere in that time. I went through all the rooms, idiotically, as if I were looking for a button lost off a shirt. When I came out into the living room again the telephone rang shrilly, knifing at the silence.

I answered it mechanically. “This is Inter-Continent Travel Service,” a girl said.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I’ve changed my mind.”

Lachlan was gone, so she must have gone with him. But that was stupid. She wouldn’t do that. Everything had gone according to plan right up to the moment I left the apartment, and when I came back five minutes later she had disappeared. Had Lachlan forced her to go with him? Had he been wise to the whole thing? Maybe he was taking her to the police right now, or the police had already been here and were looking for me now. I shook my head, trying to clear it and think.

I ran down the corridor and punched the elevator button. The car was a long time coming, and seemed to descend with agonizing slowness, as if it were filled with helium and had to be pulled down. I looked wildly around the lobby, and then hurried out onto the sidewalk. She wasn’t there. I went down the ramp into the garage. Both cars were in their stalls. I stared at them, and turned and ran out. I began to feel like a man in a nightmare. I thought about Goodwin, and then pushed him out of my mind. That would have to wait. The whole thing had blown up some way, and Cathy was in trouble. I looked up and down the sidewalk like a man in a trance.

I went back into the lobby. A man who was standing at the desk talking to the clerk turned and came toward me.

“Dr Rogers?” he said. “I’d like to speak to you for a moment.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. I had to get back to the apartment. She must be still in the building somewhere, and maybe she had gone back. I pushed past him, not even seeing him now.

“It’s quite important,” he said softly. “I think perhaps you’d be wise to listen to me, Reichert.”

Reichert. I stopped abruptly as the name crashed through my thoughts and hit me like a bucket of cold water. I turned and stared at him. “What?”

He smiled. “Perhaps we could go into the bar. Would you like a drink?”

“You say it’s important?” It was a stupid question. Even with Cathy going around and around in my mind, I could recognize danger when I saw it. It was there in the cool, incisive eyes and the probing intelligence behind them. He wasn’t unfriendly or threatening; he was just efficient.

“I believe you’ll find it so. Shall we go?”

We went. We sat down in a booth in the corner and ordered drinks. I tried to clear my mind to deal with this. Here was dynamite. And he wasn't a policeman; or if he was, they had begun recruiting their cops from Harvard Law School. He was around thirty, with a lean, alert face and crew-cut hair, and an unshined shoe or a piece of lint on the conservative Brooks Brothers suit would have been as sloppy as a tenement clothesline on a destroyer.

"Perhaps I'd better introduce myself," he said crisply. "My name's Sheldon Gerard. I'm an attorney. Winkler, Hartman, and Gerard, of El Paso. However, right at the moment I'm just more or less performing an errand for my uncle, who is a banker in a little town"—the probing eyes glanced up and went right through me—"called Wyecross. You may have heard of it."

The chill was spreading down my back, and I looked away from him until I could get control of my expression.

"My uncle," he went on with the cool efficiency of a professional executioner, "is ill at the moment, and wasn't able to travel, so he asked me to fly over here and take care of this for him."

There was no hope whatever, but I tried to bluff anyway. "That's too bad," I said, looking at my watch. "But I'm afraid you've made a mistake somewhere in your doctors. I'm not an M.D., so if you'll excuse me—"

"Nice try," he said, with something like approval in the sharp gray eyes. "But to get on—I'll be as brief as possible. To put it in four words, Reichert, the jig is up. My uncle, as you've probably already guessed, is a Mr. Howard C. Goodwin, of Wyecross. It might interest you to know that he suffered a nervous breakdown as a result of that expensive bit of hocus-pocus you and your friends sold him. Incidentally, it was a brilliant piece of work, and I believe you'd have got away with it entirely except for the thing that so often happens when a number of persons—some of them with police records—are involved. Around three weeks ago Mr. Wolford Charles fell afoul of the police in Florida on an old charge, and in the course of the investigation he let drop a few revelations concerning this particular bit of moonshine."

I couldn't say anything. I couldn't even move. I wanted to get up and run, but my legs wouldn't work. Charlie had been caught, and because she had beaten him and the double cross and taken all the money, he'd spilled it

to get revenge. All I could do was sit there and listen while this remorselessly efficient machine dictated the bill of indictment.

“Now, we’re not interested in prosecution, for several reasons. One of them is that my uncle is a banker, and naturally the publicity wouldn’t help the bank very much. The other reason, of course, is that Mr. Charles, the mastermind, is already in prison, or on his way there, on another charge, and we understand from some of his testimony that you and Mrs. Lane are more or less newcomers to the field of crime.

“So I have been empowered to offer you a little proposition. If you will return the whole sixty-five thousand dollars—which we understand from Mr. Charles’s testimony you have—we will drop the case and not call in the police at all.”

I grabbed at it. It was the only thing we had left. “All right. I’ll give it back. But how do I know I can depend on you not to call the police?”

“You don’t,” he said coolly. “Except that you have my word for it. But on the other hand, what else can you do?”

“You tell me,” I said wearily. I stood up. “Just wait in the lobby. I’ll bring the money down.”

“Very well,” he said. “But I’d advise you not to try to run.”

“Run where?” I asked.

“I see what you mean. All right, Reichert.”

I went up in the elevator and walked along the corridor.

My fingers were shaking as I fitted the key in the lock. Would she be back? And where did we go from here if she was? She had lied about Goodwin to get me to go into the thing with them. I opened the door and the apartment was empty. The silence rang in my ears.

I had to get hold of myself. There was no use trying to figure anything out now. I wasn’t capable of rational thought, and there wasn’t any time I could look for her later. The thing I had to do now, before anything else, was get rid of that money. Give it to Gerard, get it into his hands before he called the police. There were seventy one thousand-dollar bills in the drawer, the money we’d taken from Lachlan, and by giving Gerard sixty-five of them to return to Goodwin we could stay out of jail. That was the only thing that mattered now.

I hurried across the room to the desk and yanked the drawer open, and then just stood there staring into it. The money was gone. I straightened up

and rubbed a hand across my face, hard, and shook my head. The money's here, I thought. I'm just going crazy. I'm looking right at it and don't see it. I've just had too much of this. I'll be all right in a few minutes.

She'd put it there. Burglars don't read Poe, she'd said, putting it in there, slipping it into an old bank-statement envelope and throwing it carelessly in among a bunch of letters in this drawer. Not in some other drawer; in this one. I jerked it all the way out and letters and envelopes flew across the rug as I emptied it. I gathered them up one at a time and put them back. It wasn't there. It wasn't in any of the others.

This was the end of the line. She was gone, the money was gone, and I was holding the bag after the rest of the snipe hunters had gone home.

Eighteen

I was a bug in a tin cup. I was the only one left, and Gerard was waiting for me in the lobby. When he got tired of waiting, he would call the police.

I tried to light a cigarette. The lighter wouldn't work, and I crumpled the cigarette and threw it on the floor. It wasn't Gerard and the police I was trying to get away from in my thoughts; it was the awful knowledge that she had done this to me. She'd lied about Goodwin, and now she'd calmly cut my throat.

But wait. That was exactly the same thing I'd thought that awful afternoon in Wyecross, and she hadn't deserted me. Maybe it wasn't true. There must be some way out of it, some other explanation. If she had the money, why had she gone with Lachlan? Had she gone with him? But she must have; they'd both left here within five minutes. Maybe Lachlan had taken the money. Maybe he'd been wise to the thing all along, and had gone after the police. Maybe Bolton had tipped him off. I stopped suddenly.

What had Gerard said? I forced myself to stand still and think back over every bit of it, word by word, as well as I could remember it. Charlie had been arrested in Florida three weeks ago. That was it.

I grabbed the telephone and called the desk. "There's a Mr. Gerard waiting in the lobby. Would you page him and send him up to Nine-A?"

I could be wrong, but what did I have to lose? I was headed for San Quentin either way. When the buzzer sounded I opened the door and let him in.

He looked at me with raised eyebrows. "Really, Reichert, I must ask you to hurry."

I hit him. He just grunted like a rabbit and started to sway, and I hit him twice more on the way down. It was dirty, and he didn't have a chance because I outweighed him by thirty pounds, but I wasn't in any position to be squeamish about it. He didn't try to get up. He just crawfished backward

across the rug until he came to rest with his head against a chair. Blood ran out of the corner of his mouth.

His chest heaved as he fought to get his breath. When he could speak, he said, “That was a stupid thing to do.”

“I do a lot of stupid things. I’ve been doing them for several weeks.”

“I have no choice now. I’ll have to call the police.”

“I don’t think you will,” I said. “Where’s Bolton? And Wolford Charles?”

He stared blankly. “Bolton?”

“You want some more?”

“Really, Reichert—”

I started toward him. “Come on. We haven’t started yet.”

He began to look really scared.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Charlie, or Bolton, or both of them, sent you up here. They’re still after that Goodwin money. You said Charlie was arrested three weeks ago and spilled himself. Didn’t you?”

He put a hand to his jaw and stared at me, puzzled. “Yes.”

“Well, he couldn’t have told anybody three weeks ago that I was here and that the name I was going under was Rogers, because he didn’t know it. He got it from Bolton. So where are they?”

He started to shake his head. I reached down for his shirt to haul him up, and he began to whimper. He didn’t look so efficient now. I cocked a right to let him have it.

“All right,” he said. “Don’t hit me again. I’ll tell you.”

I heaved him into a chair and stood there watching him. My hand hurt and I was out of breath myself. “Let’s have it.”

“It was all their idea, but they needed somebody you didn’t know to do it. Bolton called her and asked her to meet him downtown. That was to get her out of the way so we could work on you. They didn’t think she’d fall for it, but maybe you would.”

“Wait,” I said. “When did he call?”

“About two-thirty. But she didn’t come. I waited here anyway, thinking I might see her go out. And then I did. She went out with some man wearing a white Texas hat and they got in a car and drove off. I was just getting ready to call you when you came down.”

I thought swiftly. The reason she hadn't gone down there to meet Bolton at two-thirty was that Lachlan was in the apartment, waiting to get the results of the race. She couldn't leave, even if she'd wanted to. But then she had, later, with Lachlan. But why? Had she gone to see Bolton then? And why had she taken the money?

"Where are Bolton and Charlie now?" I demanded.

"At the Sir Francis Drake. That's where she was supposed to meet them."

"Sit where you are," I said. I'd just started to reach for the telephone when the buzzer sounded. I leaped for the door with my heart pounding in my throat. But it wasn't Cathy. It was Bolton.

I watched his face as he looked toward Gerard sprawled back in the chair with blood on his face. There was only flicker of regret, and then it was gone. I wondered why he had come; there was no way he could have known the thing had already failed, and he was taking a chance of wrecking it.

"If you're looking for your boy," I said, "you can have him."

But he had already forgotten Gerard. He was out of breath, as if he had been hurrying, and I didn't like the way his face looked. "Belen, have you heard anything from Cathy?"

It began to get to me now. I didn't like the way he asked it. I grabbed his arm. "What is it? Damn it, Bolton—"

He shook my hand off with savage impatience. We were about to snarl and pile into each other like two men who had suddenly gone crazy, and it wasn't from anger. It was fear.

"Where is she?" I was crowding him, forcing him back.

He put out a hand and shoved me and I got set to swing at him. Then he barked, "Get hold of yourself, Belen," and we both realized we were acting like fools.

"All right," I said furiously. "All right. But, good God, can't you say something? What is it?"

"I don't know. But I think it may be Donnelly."

"Why?"

"She was talking to me on the phone, and then—But I'd better explain. I called her about two-thirty and said I had to see her about something very important. She seemed to have something on her mind, and practically hung

up on me. I was still waiting in the hotel room, hoping she might show up, when I saw her come down Powell with Lachlan in that foreign roadster of his. That was just after three. And a few minutes later she did call. From a pay phone somewhere. She was warning me. She had an idea I was up to something—that is, that Charlie and I were—and she'd tried to get you and you didn't answer."

That would have been when I was down in the lobby with Gerard, I thought. Wouldn't he ever get to the point?

"She said she was on her way back to the apartment. And then she suddenly quit talking. There was a gasp, as if somebody'd thrown water on her, and that was all. It was a pay phone, because the operator came on in a minute, while I was still yelling, and wanted another dime. Donnelly's here __"

"I know he's here," I said. "I know the hotel he's in." Bolton caught up with me. "I'm going with you," he said. Then we both remembered Gerard. He got out of the chair, looking dazedly at us, not even knowing what we were talking about.

"You'd better go on back to the Drake," Bolton said to him. He came with us. We nagged a cab and went off and left him standing there on the sidewalk.

I didn't know the name of the hotel. I gave the driver the general location, talking too fast and having to repeat it. We shot down off the hill, weaving through traffic, while I prayed there would be something there. It was our only lead, the only thing we had to go on. I turned and looked at Bolton. His eyes were tired, and I could see the lines of strain around his mouth. Even in the mad confusion and the fear that had hold of me, some part of my mind noticed it and wondered. Why was he taking it so hard? An hour ago he was coolly trying to swindle her.

I spotted the hotel and yelled for the driver to stop. We got out and paid him and ran across the street. There was no one in the lobby except the clerk behind the desk. He was reading a Racing Form and looked up boredly as we hurried through and up the stairs. I didn't know the number of the room, but I remembered which one it was. Bolton was right behind me as I ran down the corridor.

It hit me then, but it was too late to do anything about it. There would be two, or maybe three of them, and they all had guns. We had nothing. But it

couldn’t be helped.

I pounded on the door. There was a sound of movement inside, and somebody was fumbling at the bolt. I got set to crash against the door when it opened, and then caught myself just in time.

It was a man I’d never seen before. He was wearing a pair of glasses and nothing else, and he was holding a highball glass in his hand and there was lipstick on his face. “‘Shgoin’ on?” he demanded. “You lookin’ for shmack in the kisser?”

I stared blankly at him. “Sorry, Mac,” I said dazedly. “I—I was looking for my wife.”

“Whash she look like?” he asked. Then he drew himself up indignantly. “You gidda hell out of here.”

We turned away. I felt sick. It was our only chance and now we didn’t have that. Could it have been the wrong room? No. That was one hotel room I could remember. We ran down the stairs to the lobby.

The clerk glanced at me with surly disinterest. “What you want?”

“A man named Donnelly. Did he check out?”

“Nobody here by that name.” He dismissed us and went back to his paper.

I reached across the desk and got his collar and heaved. When he was straight up and clear of the chair I let go and shoved. He bounced against the mailboxes. “Maybe we could have your attention for a minute,” I said.

He stood up. “I tell you—”

“We’re looking for a man who was here. I don’t know what name he was registered under. He’s a little guy who looks like he was made out of pipe cleaners and he’s got the face of a forty-year-old baby. There was a big guy with him. Where are they?”

“They checked out.”

“When?”

“Two days ago.”

“Did he have a car?”

“I don’t know. I think so.”

We went outside. What chance did we have, in a city of eight hundred thousand, and not even a place to start? Bolton flagged a cab and we went back to the apartment.

“We’ve got to call the police,” I said.

“We can’t. She wouldn’t have any chance then.”

I waved him off wildly and reached for the telephone. He jerked it out of my hand. I was raging. I tried to swing at him. He caught my arm.

“Look, Belen. We can’t call the police. Our only chance is to wait here. Donnelly may call you. Or make her call.”

“Why the hell would he call us?”

“I’ve got to tell you something.” He had gone over by the window, and when he turned back I could see the strain in his face. “Maybe I can make you see what I mean. And stand back till I get through. Cathy’s in a bad spot, and it isn’t going to help any to have us swinging at each other. Donnelly’s not what I said he was. I invented him.”

I stared at him. We were all going crazy.

“Donnelly’s not a gangster. He just thinks he’s one. He’s a punk, a cheap horse player with a warped mind. You described him when you said he had the face of a forty-year-old baby. Movie gangsters are his heroes. He goes to crime pictures and patterns his speech and clothing and mannerisms after movie killers.”

That was it, the thing that had puzzled me for so long.

Even in all this madness I could remember the odd impression I’d had every time I’d seen him, that feeling that I was watching a killer in a B movie. But what was Bolton trying to say?

“He was a punk who always wanted to be a big-shot gangster and didn’t have the nerve,” he went on harshly, “and now he thinks he is one. I did it. I built him up. God knows I didn’t intend it to end this way. How did I know how near the edge he was?”

“What are you driving at?”

“Shut up and listen! I’m trying to tell you. It was a game I was working on Cathy. I invented that story about the four-hundred-dollar bet and got hold of Donnelly to play the part. I pretended to be scared to death of him to scare her, to make her pay off the eight thousand she was supposed to owe him.”

I went for him. I was wild, not even half seeing him, just asking for it. He rolled with the punch and countered. His fist crashed under my jaw and I slid down beside the chair.

He was raging. “Will you stop acting like a fool, for God’s sake?”

I shook my head and tried to get up. The blow had knocked a little sense back into me. We had more on our minds than fighting each other.

“Maybe he’s not so dangerous,” I said.

“He is dangerous. Can’t you see that? He’s kidnapped a girl, and when his nerve goes back on him, how do we know what he’ll do in a tight spot? That’s the reason we can’t call the police. If a patrol car pulled up alongside him he might fold up like a wet paper towel, and on the other hand he might start blasting away at everything. There’s nothing crazier than a cowardly punk with a gun.

“I could see it beginning to get him when he looked me up in Los Angeles—after I was up here the first time. You’d already bounced him around and locked him in that freight car, remember? I told him the deal was off. He couldn’t scare Cathy; it was useless. He began to pull that tough stuff on me and I could see he had begun to believe it himself, so I slapped him down. But it didn’t do any good. He was already the Napoleon of the underworld, and he’d picked up a couple of hoodlums who think he’s just what he pretends to be. What’ll they do when they find out they’ve been sucked into committing a serious crime by a crazy punk who’d cry at a parking ticket?”

“All right, all right,” I said desperately. “But what makes you think he’ll call? What the hell would he want to call me for?”

“Because that’s just what a movie gangster would do. He wants money, and that’s the way they do it in the movies.”

All they had to do was take it. Just take the money and kill her, on a back road somewhere in the Marin County hills. I didn’t want to say it, but I had to.

“He won’t have to call to get it,” I said. “She’s got it with her.”

He stared at me. “How much?”

“Seventy thousand dollars.”

“Good God,” he said. “Oh, good God.” He went striding across the room. “Look, Belen, maybe they’ll just take the money and throw her out.”

“Yes,” I said. “Except that he’s crazy. And if we were crazy too, maybe we could guess.”

I started for the telephone again, to call the police anyway, when something suddenly occurred to me. I stopped. “Didn’t she say on the phone that she’d tried to get me? And she was warning you to lay off?”

“Yes. That’s right,” he said. Then he began to see it too. “Say—”

“Then maybe she hasn’t got the money with her. It may be still here in the apartment.” I had it now. It all fitted. That call from Bolton had put her on her guard. She had a hunch they were trying to get her out of the way so they could try some kind of sucker game on me to get their hands on that money. But there was no way she could warn me during that act in the apartment for Lachlan’s benefit. And afterward she’d had to leave with Lachlan. That was the thing I hadn’t been able to understand before, but I could see it now. We’d made it too convincing. He’d thought I was going to come back and kill her, and had insisted on taking her with him when he left. She had to go, to make it look right. But after she’d left him, downtown somewhere, she’d called Bolton and warned him to lay off, and had tried to call me. She wouldn’t have worried about it if she’d had the money with her. So it must be here.

“Well, that means he’ll call here,” Bolton said. “Extortion, because he knows she has the money from Goodwin.”

My mind was working a little better now. And I was suspicious of Bolton again. “There’s just one thing I want to know,” I said. “What’s your angle this time? How much of this junk can I believe? You’ve just told me you were trying to scare her out of eight thousand dollars with Donnelly. Two hours ago you and Charlie were trying to swindle her out of sixty-five thousand with that game with Gerard. What are you trying to pull now?”

He stopped his pacing and ran a hand through his hair. “Does this look like an act?” he asked harshly. “For God’s sake, Belen, this is the truth. It’s on the level. Sure, I’ll admit I tried to swindle her. I’ll try it again if I get a chance. She’d do the same to me, and love it. But having her hurt is something else. I couldn’t stand it if anything happened to her.”

“You couldn’t?” I asked. It was too much for me. “You’re lying.”

“No,” he said quietly, staring straight at me. “I’m not lying now, Belen.”

And I believed him. He was as crazy about her as I was. There wasn’t any way on earth to understand it, but there it was. Suddenly it occurred to me that they were just alike. I’d known her all my life and still I didn’t understand her as well as he did—as well as they understood each other.

But what difference did that make now? The chances were that neither of us would ever see her alive again. It had been—God, how long had it been? Where was she? She couldn’t be dead. She was so beautifully and

brilliantly alive that you couldn’t conceive of her ever being anything else. I wanted to go to the telephone and throw it against the wall to make it ring.

I would walk toward it, then away from it. I would go clear across the room and try to shut it out of my mind to make it ring suddenly and surprise me. I went into other rooms. I stared out the window. Without even bothering to think about it, I saw Lachlan’s foreign roadster driven up from the garage and the Filipino and two bellboys loading it with bags, and then, suddenly, Lachlan leaping from a cab, climbing into the car, and driving away. He was gone. We had spent untold hours planning and rehearsing an act to make him do just that, and now that I saw him doing it, it meant nothing at all. I was waiting for a telephone to ring.

The sun was gone now, and fog was coming in over the hill. In a little while it would be dark. And in just a little while we could quit hoping.

I stopped abruptly and turned to listen. It was only a tiny sound, but it went through me like flying slivers of glass. It wasn’t the telephone. It was someone putting a key into the lock on the other side of the door. The door swung open and Cathy was standing there, with Donnelly and the big man behind her.

“Darling,” she said, “I hope you weren’t worried about me.

Nineteen

Donnelly shoved her. She shot into the room and tripped on her high heels and fell. I started toward her. The two men were inside the room now, and Donnelly took the automatic out of his coat pocket. “Uh-uh,” he said.

The humorist looked from Bolton to me with apparent relish. “How about these two clowns, Monk?”

“Shove ‘em in another room so we can talk to the babe.”

“Listen, you little punk—” I began.

He tilted his head sidewise and looked at me. “Yeah?” he asked. It was the motion-picture killer at his deadliest—detached, professional, utterly without emotion. And it was terrifying. Not because of that, but because he was as crazy as a loon.

Bolton tried it. “Donnelly, I think you’ve carried this stupid joke about far enough.”

Donnelly gave him the same stare, as impersonal as death. “Well,” he said. “A comic.”

Cathy was struggling to her feet. Donnelly held the gun in his right hand and shoved her again with the left. She staggered backward and fell onto the sofa.

He jerked his head toward Bolton and me. “Lock these clowns in the bedroom, Brock.”

The humorist took a sap out of his pocket and slapped it against his palm, listening to the meaty sound of it. “This way, boys.” He nodded toward the bedroom. “The quiz show is going on the air in this studio.”

I started for him. Donnelly jerked the muzzle of the automatic around. Brock feinted at my groin with a knee and as I doubled over involuntarily and swung aside, with my hands down, the sap flashed in the air.

I wasn’t knocked out. I was just incapable of movement, lying on the floor with a red ocean of pain sloshing around in my head while the apartment tilted and wheeled. I could hear a voice saying, “—and take this

chunk of meat with you." Then I was being lifted by the shoulders and dragged across the rug.

I was in another room. It was dark, but I could hear someone moving. A light switch clicked, and I saw I was lying on the rug beside the bed. My head was bursting and nausea was a snake uncoiling in my stomach. Bolton was bending over me. He had blood running down his face from a cut laid open on his forehead.

I pulled my way up the side of the bed and sat down. I was weak and shaking. And then I heard the sound from the living room, a sudden, sharp crack like a canoe paddle on water, and a gasp.

A voice I recognized as Donnelly's was saying, "All right. You been stalling long enough. Where's the money you took off the chump?"

Somehow I got off the bed and started for the door. Bolton caught me by the arm. I turned and looked at him. His eyes were terrible. I got to the door. It wasn't locked, because the bolt was on this side, in the bedroom, but it opened the other way.

He shook his head. "The sofa's against it," he whispered. I had sense enough to know what he meant. All we had to do was push on it and shove the sofa back, with two men waiting on the other side with guns.

I could hear Brock. "How about me taking a turn at bat, Monk? Maybe she needs to be lifted a couple times."

Pain was still pounding at my skull, but my mind was clearing a little so I could think. We had to keep our heads. If we let the sounds on the other side of the door push us over the edge and started going wild, we'd all be dead. She would break after a while and tell them where the money was, but maybe Brock wasn't interested primarily in the money alone. You could see he got his fun in other ways.

I moved shakily to the window and looked out. It was totally dark now, and fog pressed in on the building like saturated gauze. Nine floors down the street lamp was faintly visible, while below and to the left the neon sign over the cocktail lounge was a diffused and watery splash of orange. I reached for the light switch and cut it and looked again. Beyond me to the left one of the big casement windows in the living room was partly open. The drapes were drawn but a little light escaped to seep futilely into the fog and lose itself. I strained my eyes downward and could just faintly see what

I was looking for, a narrow ledge perhaps five inches wide running across the front of the building just below the windows.

Could I make it? The windows were a good six feet apart and each opened from the center, so I'd have to go around the one on the other end to get inside it, but by spread-eagling myself along the ledge I should be able to span the distance from one to the other. Bolton was beside me in the darkness, peering out.

I flicked the light back on. He shook his head. We moved away from the window so they wouldn't hear us and he said, "Not with the two of them in there and the light on. They'd get you coming through the drapes."

I knew that, but there was still one chance. There was a reading lamp on the night table beside the bed. I grabbed it up and pulled the plug out of the wall outlet. There was the stinging, sharp impact of flesh on flesh from beyond the wall and again that strangled intake of breath like a gasp, and we looked away from each other. My flesh crawled, and I couldn't control the trembling of my hands.

I took the lamp in one hand and the cord in the other and jerked. The wires tore out of the base, one already bare on the end. I put the other between my teeth and bit down, yanking on it with my hands. It cut my lip, but a little of the insulation was gone. I twisted the two bare ends together.

Bolton looked at me and shook his head. "If the lights in there are on a different circuit, you're dead."

We could hear Brock. "This won't get it, Monk. I tell you. You want to hear her sing? Just yank off her blouse and that brassiere and hand me your cigarette."

I stood up. "Wait till I get on the ledge and around the end of that other window. When I start to climb in, plug it back in the socket."

"You're still groggy. Let me go."

"No," I said.

Then I was outside and had my feet on the ledge. I had to lean outward over nine floors of empty fog to get around the edge of the open window. Now I was past it and could stand up against the wall, my face touching the bricks and my left hand holding onto the steel window frame. It was dark and everything was wet with the fog. I edged outward toward the right, inching my feet along with my heels extending out over space.

My left arm was straight out now, the fingers just gripping the window. The bricks were cold against my face. I put out my right arm and felt the fingertips just brush the edge of the other window. I couldn't make it. I couldn't get hold of both windows at once. My arms weren't long enough.

I teetered precariously, trying to stretch out another inch, letting go a little with the fingers of the left hand until they were just braced against the window frame, balancing there with my face shoved against the wall. I still couldn't hook the fingers of my right hand over the edge of the other one. I strained, trying not to think of the hundred feet of space between me and the fog-shrouded sidewalk below.

Then from inside the room I heard the sound of cloth being ripped and the little cry of terror torn from her as she began to break. I let go completely with the left hand, pushing, and swung across the wet, dark surface of the wall like an inverted pendulum. The bricks pushed at my chest, forcing me outward over nothingness, while I clawed wildly with my right. My fingers closed over the upper edge of the steel frame just as I started to drop and then I was hanging from it and pawing for the ledge with my feet. One of them hit and I pushed up with it as I pulled myself up and I was standing again, leaning outward to get around the edge. In a second I was around, with the angle of the steel frame behind me. Every muscle in my body was trembling.

I looked back and I could see Bolton in the light from the open window. He was watching me, and when I nodded, his head disappeared. I tried to pray. If the lights of the two rooms were on different circuits I didn't have a chance. The bedroom fuse would blow when he plugged in the shorted wires, but I'd have to go through the drapes into the living room in full view of the two of them with guns.

I could hear the faint but terrible rustlings of impotent struggle and I could hear her beginning to cry. And then the lights chopped off. I clawed my way inside, fighting through the drapes.

The darkness was impenetrable, as black as the bottom of a mine. I heard Brock curse, "What the hell," and I moved toward the sound of his voice with my hands out in front of me. I collided with somebody and we went down in a threshing tangle. All hell exploded at once. I heard a crash that sounded like glass breaking somewhere, in the darkness and then the scraping as Bolton fought at the bedroom door, shoving back the sofa. I

knew it was Brock I had when a big fist crashed against my head. I swung wildly and hit the rug. I located his face with one clawing hand and swung at it with the other. He managed to land on me again, and then we were locked in a writhing mass of arms and legs. I got him by the throat and hung on, raging, not even feeling the blows battering on my face and chest.

Suddenly there was a light. I managed to swing my head a little and saw it was Cathy holding a cigarette lighter. “Put that out!” I screamed. “Donnelly! The gun!”

“He won’t shoot anybody,” she said, and just then Bolton came running past her. He appeared to take something out of her hand and then he was kneeling beside me. His arm swung, there was a meaty crunch, and Brock went limp. I looked at it. It was Donnelly’s gun.

I got unsteadily to my feet and held onto a chair. I’d taken a beating and I was weak. In the faint light I could see Donnelly lying on the rug with a broken table lamp beside him and Cathy herself holding up the cigarette lighter. Her hair was wildly tousled, her blouse was torn, and I could see the stinging red on her face where she’d been slapped, but she was unmarked. She swayed a little and tried to smile.

“I socked him,” she gurgled ecstatically. “I hit him with the lamp.”

I caught her just as she started to fall. The darkness closed in around us and I heard Bolton saying something about the fuse box. I sat down on the floor and just held her in my arms. I knew it was the last time I ever would.

* * *

It was a half hour before things quieted down. We got the lights on again, and when Donnelly and Brock started to come around Bolton pointed toward the door with the gun.

“In just three minutes, I’m going to call the police,” he said. Donnelly was crying, and Brock was looking at him with contempt as they left.

Cathy had changed clothes. We sat in the living room with drinks in our hands. She rattled the ice in her glass and glanced across at me and smiled.

“Mike, darling,” she said happily, “do you realize we’ve done it? At last. After all those years.”

“Yes,” I said. I got up and walked over to the window and looked out at the fog.

“You don’t have to worry about it, Mike. He was so scared when he left here he’ll never see through it. It was beautiful, wasn’t it?”

“I know,” I said. “He’s already gone.”

I didn’t feel anything about him at all. I don’t know what I had expected, but there just wasn’t anything. What he had done couldn’t be wiped out by what we had done. I didn’t feel any remorse for having swindled him. Not him. And I didn’t feel any pride in it, or satisfaction. I tried to think of some reaction, but the only thing I could come up with was that I was just tired of him. I was sick of the sound of his name, and I didn’t even want to think about him any more.

“It was beautiful, Judd,” she was saying to Bolton. “When we have time, I want to tell you just how we did it.”

It had been coming ever since I’d picked up that letter on Lachlan’s desk. I didn’t want it to. But there wasn’t anything I could do about it. The confusion and excitement and the worry about her had kept putting it off, but it was here now. I turned around and faced her. “What do you think we ought to do now?” I asked.

“Why don’t we go to Acapulco for a few weeks?”

I shook my head. “I mean after that. Remember, we haven’t got Lachlan to look forward to any more.”

“Oh,” she said cheerfully, “I’ve got loads of ideas. Some even better than this one. But this was beautiful, wasn’t it? It was just so perfect, Judd. I mean, for Lachlan. You see, Lachlan is essentially a wise-guy type, a pseudo sophisticate, and the thing we had to do—”

I walked slowly over and stood in front of her. Bolton stopped listening to her and watched me. “Cathy,” I said, “where did you hide that money?”

She smiled. “In one of your suitcases.”

“How about bringing it out here?”

She looked at me questioningly, but got up and went into the bedroom. She came out in a minute with the envelope in her hand. Bolton was staring now.

“What are you going to do, Mike?” she asked curiously.

Without answering, I sat down at the coffee table, slid the bills out, and began counting. It took quite a while. All seventy of them were there. The room was very quiet when I had finished. I put them in two piles, sixty-five in one and five in the other. Then I passed the five to her.

She was staring at me. “Mike, what on earth—”

I put the sixty-five one-thousand-dollar bills into the envelope and shoved it in my pocket. “You spent a week in Wyecross, investigating, didn’t you?” I asked her. “And you told me Howard C. Goodwin was the one who’d worked for Lachlan.”

“Yes.” She was hardly breathing as she watched me.

“Well, I spent a lot longer than a week there, and I went ahead and helped swindle him. So I guess neither of us has very much to be proud of. Do we?”

“What do you mean?”

“It makes you a liar, and it makes me stupid for believing you.”

“No,” she said defiantly. “I tell you—”

“It’s no use, Cathy,” I said. I told her about the letter in Lachlan’s apartment.

“All right,” she said hotly. “I did know it. But, Mike, I went out there in the first place because his name was Goodwin, and because Elaine said he had been in Mexico.”

“And you found out he wasn’t the one. But when I asked you, that night in New Orleans—”

“But don’t you see, Mike?” she said frantically. “I had to tell you that. We had to have you. Could I give up the chance at Lachlan we’d waited for all our lives?”

That was it, I thought. I felt rotten as hell. It was always Lachlan, and still it wasn’t Lachlan at all—or it hadn’t been for a long time. He was an excuse, or maybe he had started it in the beginning, but he really didn’t have anything to do with it any more. She had needed him, maybe, to rationalize it up until now, but that was all over.

It was a game. It was the most fascinating game in the world, and it was the money. I thought of the way she had been ever since we had started to work on Lachlan, the preoccupation, the tense excitement showing in her eyes, and the way she would sometimes forget I was there. It had been there all the time for me to see, and now that I couldn’t evade it any longer I knew I had been seeing it in spite of trying so hard to look the other way. She had smiled with that hard, bright look in her eyes when I’d warned her Lachlan was no sucker and that it wouldn’t be easy. She didn’t want it to be

easy. The more difficult it was, the better. It was a challenge. That was what made it fun.

She'd not only been willing to swindle a man who'd never done anything to her, knowing he wasn't the Goodwin we were after, but she had made up that story about Elaine Holman for the sheer pleasure there was in knowing she had swindled Charlie too. She didn't stand to get any more money out of it that way; it was just the secret satisfaction there was in outfoxing the fox, of getting him to do the work, and of being able to laugh at both him and Bolton afterward, because no matter what happened, the police would never be able to touch her, because she hadn't taken any part in it.

It was strange, as I thought about it now—about the way she had lied to me about Goodwin—that there wasn't any anger. When I'd left her in El Paso I'd been in a rage, on the ragged edge of hurting her, but now there wasn't anything except a sort of sadness. She couldn't help it. Maybe she'd been made that way by what Lachlan had done when we were children. But there wasn't anything she could do about it now.

I tried to straighten out the way I felt about it, but it was all mixed up, and the only thing I was sure of was that I didn't want any more of it. I was just sick of confidence games. I was sick of double crosses and double double crosses and of wondering who somebody really was and what he really meant when he said something. I reminded myself that I wasn't in a very good position to be pointing the finger at her from a moral standpoint; I hadn't had any qualms about helping to swindle Lachlan, and I didn't have any now. All I needed was to have the other fellow do it first. Maybe that was the exact point at which we divided. I had to have that justification, or that excuse, and now she didn't any more.

I sighed. I knew there wasn't any use, but I had to try. The twenty-three years were talking.

"You know what I'm going to do with the rest of it, don't you?" I asked.

"No," she said. She did know. I could see it in her face.

"I'm going to send it back to Goodwin. Do you want me to, or don't you?"

"Send it back to Goodwin? Mike, are you crazy?"

I stood up. "I just wanted to know how you felt about it," I said. "And I think you know you can't stop me, so let's don't make this any rougher than

we have to."

I went into the bedroom and pulled my two old suitcases out of the closet and started packing them. I didn't get half my stuff, and I didn't pay any attention to what I did pack because I was in a hurry. I was started now, and if I kept going, fast, without thinking too much about it, I could do it. She could go with Bolton; they understood each other. That was the way it had to be. But there wasn't any fun in thinking about it or in knowing that someday she was going to wind up in prison. When I came back out into the living room she had quit raging at me and there were tears in her eyes. She turned to Bolton.

"Can't you stop him from doing a crazy thing like this?"

Bolton shook his head, and looked at me and smiled. We both knew what he meant, and maybe she did too. If I wanted to cut my throat, why should he try to stop me?

He lit a cigarette and said with urbane amusement, "Belen appears to have done a little soul-searching and come up with the decaying remains of some sort of peasant morality. I think you'd do better to leave him with it before he starts trying to share it with you."

She turned abruptly away from him before he had finished. "Mike," she said, "please—"

"Maybe you'd both better come with me," I said, "so there won't be any doubt as to what I did with the money. It won't take long."

I carried the bags and we went down front and got a cab. She sat between us as we rode down the hill. We were all very silent. We stopped at the airline terminal while I took the bags in and checked them and bought a ticket to Las Vegas; then we went on down to Market.

We got out in front of the branch bank that stays open at night. They came in with me and watched, saying nothing, while I bought a cashier's check for $65,000, made out to Howard C. Goodwin. Bolton didn't want to stop me and she couldn't, because a scene would only bring the cops. We walked over to a drugstore and I bought an envelope and a stamp. I addressed it at the counter, put the check in, and sealed it. In the upper left-hand corner I wrote one word: Reichert. We went out on the sidewalk.

It was foggy down on Market now. We walked slowly along the sidewalk, with Cathy in the middle, and none of us said anything. There was a mailbox on the next corner. I handed her the envelope. When she

looked up at me I saw she was crying. She shook her head and handed it back to me.

"No," she said. "I'd rather you did it. Maybe it means something to you. I'd only feel like an idiot."

I dropped it in the slot and let the metal lid clang.

"You're a fool, Belen," Bolton said.

"Shut up," she said tonelessly. And then, "Get a cab. And wait in it. I'll be there."

He flagged one and got in. She stared at me silently for a moment. And then she said, "I guess you know now, Mike, why I kept putting you off when you asked me to marry you again. I knew this was going to happen sometime, and it's simpler this way, isn't it?"

"Do we have to do it?" I asked.

"Yes," she said. "You know that."

"Why?"

"Because it just wouldn't work any more. We both know it, don't we?"

"Yes. I guess we do."

"But it's been a long time, hasn't it? Remember?"

"I'd rather not." I wanted to get going while I could.

She tried to smile. "Let's don't kiss each other good-by. I'll just go now. But, Mike, we did get even with Lachlan, didn't we?"

I thought about Lachlan. He had ruined more than Dunbar & Belen when he pulled off that scheme sixteen years ago.

"No," I said. "But if I were you I wouldn't worry about it any more."

She had started toward the cab, but now she turned and looked back.

"Why?" she asked.

"Because we never will," I said.

THE END